

A WREATH FOR THE INNOCENTS

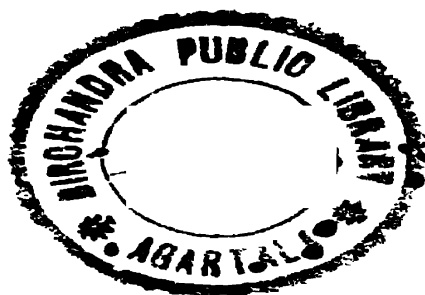
Lieutenant John Xiberras de Balyard was a scion of one of the noble families of Malta, Lucia the daughter of a wineshop owner—but they fell in love.

The odds were all against them; neither the proud de Balyards nor Lucia's father, an ardent Labour man, would tolerate the match. Only Lucia's confessor realised that here was a God-sent opportunity to unite the classes on the Island—now rent by political strife.

But what could an old priest do in the face of the Monsignor, determined to prevent the pollution of the blood he shared?

A WREATH
FOR THE
INNOCENTS

A novel by
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Author's Note

FOR THE INFORMATION of the more fastidious readers, the action of this tale takes place in Malta G.C.

All the characters in it are entirely imaginary and have no bearing whatsoever on any persons, living or dead, clerical or secular.

If, as it may happen, there will be readers who think that this tale carries a message—or whatever they may choose to call it—they will, of course, be at liberty to think so; although the existence of a 'message' where none was intended would be news to the author himself.

For
A N E,

Part One

**'But I said in the excess of
my mind; I am cast away
from before thy eyes.'**

PSALM XXX, 23

PROLOGUE WITH AN INNOCENT

The sirocco—it kneads your breath and cloys it. Queer wind the sirocco—you're neither here nor there; you're neither of the earth nor of the sky. It gives you that feeling. . . .

It made the sawdust on the floor damp and cloggy, so that when she walked to the old beggar at the door, the stuff stuck in sodden clumps to the bottoms of her shoes.

Old Marta greeted her with a smile that wove her face into cobwebs of wrinkles. Her hands, gnarled and blue-veined, quivered with supplication.

'You never forget me, my darling,' the old woman croaked.

She took the half-crown Lucia gave her and deposited it in the pocket of her long skirt, black and green with age.

'May the Saints shower their blessings on your head, my beautiful one,' said old Marta.

She turned and looked into the gloom of the shop, fixing her eyes on the over-size flagon that lay in a corner under a shelf of bottles and empty boxes. She licked her jagged, colourless lips greedily until saliva glistened on her chin.

Lucia poured the old woman a mugful of wine. She did it with the air of one who is going through an old ritual, for she was doing exactly what she did every Friday morning—a half-crown to the old beggar and a draught of wine. It was the small weekly price she paid for a contented mind. . . .

Usually the woman would depart on drinking the wine. Today, however, she did not appear to be in a hurry. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand, and leaned wheezing against the doorpost. Outside the wind swirled the dust into strange shapes and some of it blew into the shop.

'Why don't you go now?' asked Lucia. 'I have to sweep the sawdust and clean the glasses.'

But the old woman stayed there, breathing hard, her face contracted into a nerveless grin. Lucia took the broom from behind the door and began sweeping the sawdust into the street, just avoiding the old woman's bare feet.

Old Marta watched her; then, as Lucia drew near again, she put out a hand and gripped her arm. The sudden gesture almost made Lucia cry out. For a moment she stood, her face close to the woman's, hardly daring to breathe, surprise in her brown eyes. Marta's breath reeked with wine, and it made Lucia feel sick.

'Your father has a beautiful daughter,' said old Marta. 'And she is as good as his wine. Help me to sit.'

Lucia led her slowly to a bench that was fixed along the length of one wall, and sat her down on it.

Her heart was pounding and, for one terrible moment, she thought the woman was already dead. She felt weak with fear.

'Come and sit by me, child,' said the woman.

The sun blazed on the wall opposite, and the crunching of feet in the grey street and the trundling of hawke's carts generated a gloom and a stillness inside the shop that was oppressive.

The woman's long, fleshless fingers were in Lucia's hair, feeling it, tugging it slightly, tress by tress; then the fingers sidled down to her full, smooth cheeks. She could feel their hard skin and the callouses at their tips, and she knew that they left red marks where they touched.

'Beautiful child,' said old Marta.

Lucia tried to remove the fingers from her face, but they kept a firm hold. She felt drained of all strength in her silent struggle. And yet it was a weakness, she felt, that held in it a strange kind of contentment.

'This is my last Friday, my darling,' said the old woman. 'I have lived long enough, may the Saints be praised! I touch your hair and your face because, when I die, I want to die beautiful, as I once was, as you are now . . . Hush, do not be afraid of me, sweet child.'

The wind had risen slightly and the dust was now thick and flying in all directions.

'I know what your heart is yearning for most of all,' the woman was saying. 'But I know your moods, your heat and your cold; I have thought about you many a time. For never

was wine as good as your father's, and never a better hand to give me the wine than yours, my beauty.'

Lucia sat calm but rigid, the words filling her with a kind of wonder and fear. She had resigned herself to the old fingers in her hair and on her face, as she was now resigned, eager in fact, to hear more of what the woman had to say.

She prayed that no one would enter the shop just then—for this was a moment, she knew instinctively, that was to be the pillar of her life, would point the direction and the end.

'Like this,' she heard the woman say, close to her ear, 'it will be like the priest's absolution and a peace. And you shall remember me always, and in the turmoil, you shall feel me again and again. And you shall feel contentment when everything else is gone. What was once full will be empty. But the emptiness shall not grieve you; it will not give you despair, but courage.'

Queer wind the sirocco: you're neither here nor there, you're neither of the earth nor of the sky . . . It gives you that feeling

She was almost unconscious of the woman's dull eyes on her and her hands remained where old Marta had put them—on the coarse, black clothes over the long, flat, desiccated breasts

They felt the empty form of the skin, its hardness and its uselessness

CHAPTER I

I

The young man, seated in the corner, held his legs straight in front of him and crossed at the ankles. His hands lay deep in his trousers pockets. His wine, darkly purple in the bad light and tobacco haze, was untouched on the table before him.

Through the haze he watched the girl, and when she happened to glance in his direction he winked at her and then savoured the flush that immediately suffused her face above the lace neck-line of her white blouse.

But never for one moment did he stop watching her father, who sat, thin, shrivelled and immobile, on a high stool behind the counter. A cheroot dangled unlit from his lips; the only sign of life about him lay in the quick, darting movements of his eyes glancing over the heads of his customers as they sat drinking his wine and talking loudly.

The frown on the young man's fine features deepened as he watched this man behind the counter. His hatred for the man mingled bitter-sweetly with the warmth the sight of Lucia kindled in him.

It was six and quite dark outside. He pushed the wine away from him and lit a cigarette. But his desire for Lucia increased; so he lifted the glass, drained it quickly and replaced it on the table with a clatter.

He called to her as if for more wine.

When she came for his glass, he caught her hand and whispered to her: 'Make the excuse of having some shopping to do. I shall be waiting near the Knights' Hall, on St Elmo's side. Please.'

Even as he whispered to her, he had one eye on her father behind the counter, and on his cheroot: it was still unlighted.

'Damn him,' he muttered as he rose to leave.

Lights of ships and shore bars shimmered on the waters of the harbour. A tug's siren spurted a sound that echoed long after the pull of the chain. The stars were partly hidden behind a high mast; it refracted and dulled them.

He was in the darkest part of the rampart: below him the harbour; while behind him stretched the long, wide building of the ancient Knights. The hum of Valletta came to him fitfully with the night breeze and he was feeling cold.

His hands were warm, however, and already he could feel Lucia. He closed his eyes, so that the stars in the inky sky, the lights in the harbour, the presence of the city were blotted out for a while, and only she remained.

He gritted his teeth, so intense was his concentration.

Then, when he opened his eyes and the objects around him intruded again, he felt more composed. He leant against the broad wall of the rampart, feeling so mellow that even the memory of her father failed to irritate him.

She was a long time coming. He looked down the long, dark road towards the distant corner light, wishing to see her as she turned the corner. But there was no sign of her. He lit another cigarette and tried not to look, hoping that when he looked again she would be there, coming towards him. But he could not help it: he looked down the road again. The dark stretched emptily to the yellow globe of light at the distant corner of the road. . . .

For a moment he felt angry with her for not being clever enough to deceive her father and leave the shop—just for a few minutes, that was all! Then he cursed himself for being unreasonable. It was evident that she could not make it.

He promised himself he would wait until he had finished smoking his cigarette. If she had not turned up by then he would go.

And when he had thrown the cigarette over the bastion into the Grand Harbour, she still had not come. . . .

He was not angry any more, and his desire had left him.

Even his hands were cold now. He thrust them into his pockets and, after a last glance at the lighted corner, walked away. It was a moment of frustration, but it did not particularly disturb him. . . .

As he entered the gates of Fort St Elmo, Lucia turned the corner where the yellow light stood at the far end of Knights Hall and almost ran towards the spot where he had stood barely a minute before. . . .

3

Lieutenant John Xiberras de Balyard took up his brandy and looked intently at his friend, Lieutenant Wally, who was lying on his back on the mess sofa blowing smoke-rings. The two were alone. Neither of them had spoken a word since John came in.

Now Wally's lean body stirred on the sofa. He said through a smoke-ring: 'Well?'

'What business is it of yours?' John said irritably at his friend's sleep head.

Wally laughed and settled himself more comfortably on the sofa. 'Catch me doing that for any girl,' he said.

'Do what?'

'Wait for her, of course,' said Wally. He turned his head sideways to look at John. 'Isn't that what you've been doing? Waiting for her when all the time you knew she wouldn't turn up. Hell, old chap, why don't you admit it?'

John said nothing. He twirled the glass between his fingers and looked vacantly at the dart-board on the wall opposite.

'This is the first time she's let me down,' he said grimly. 'We've only met twice so far and both times she managed it by the skin of her teeth. It's that father of hers; won't let her out of his sight, damn him.'

'I know the chap,' said Wally, falling in with John's mood. 'He got his knife into us all right. Was a gunner during the war, Harbour battery. They say he brought down more Messerschmitts and Junkers than he had hair on his head. But he hated his C.O. more than he did the Jerries; or, for that

matter, anyone above the rank of N.C.O. A bloody rum chap.'

'It's a great pity the Jerries didn't get him instead,' said John, downing his brandy.

Wally looked quickly at John.

'Does he know about you two?' he asked.

'He may or he may not.'

'You sound pretty serious,' Wally said. 'For God's sake, don't tell me you've got this girl under your skin? Believe me, no girl's worth it. My motto is get 'em, rape 'em and leave 'em.'

John glanced at him, then lowered his head.

'You're not serious?' Wally asked again.

'I might be.'

Lieutenant Wally's explosive laugh was well known in the Mess; it was the bane of his fellow officers and had been a matter of concern at Sandhurst. It burst from him now.

'By God, John,' he said, 'you surprise me! Have you stopped to consider what effect this would have on your mother if she came to know? Let's face it, your mother's an altogether admirable person, but she isn't exactly plebeian in outlook, is she?'

When John did not speak, he went on: 'Look, old chap, why don't you concentrate on a good time and leave the bloody heart out of it? Why don't you, old man, eh?'

John stirred, yawned and loosened his collar.

'I think I'll turn in now,' he said, looking at his watch. 'I've got to turn out early tomorrow.'

'Why don't you do as I say?' persisted Lieutenant Wally.

'I might,' said John over his shoulder, and left the Mess.

CHAPTER II

Lucia lighted the small, squat candle in front of the Virgin. Then she crossed the room and drew the brown, checked curtains across the window. The room was in darkness except for the candle on the chest of drawers on which stood the clay Madonna.

From directly below came the sound of her father's voice as he talked with the few men who still remained in the shop. It was late.

The evening's wine-fumes rose through the ceiling ventilator and percolated into her bedroom. Not that she gave the warm, tangy smell of the wine any conscious notice. She had always smelt it, as long as she could remember. For this was the room in which her mother had begotten her and the shop had been since that time. . . .

Perhaps he did not really want to meet me, she reflected, perhaps he had something else to do or somewhere to go, and what he told me was only a wish!

She undressed slowly and put each article of clothing neatly on top of the brass bedstead.

When she was naked she caught her reflection in the long, oval mirror of the old, mahogany dressing-table that had belonged to her mother. The young, slim whiteness of her body seemed like a stranger to her and she moved nearer to the mirror, wide-eyed and hesitant, yet full of the wish for discovery. It was the first clear view of her body that she had ever permitted herself. . . . She looked then at her own face and knew, for the first time, how young and beautiful she was. So that she thought she was looking at a stranger, a beautiful, white stranger. . . .

The splutter of the candle ran swift shadowy fingers over her, and she turned away from the mirror suddenly and hastened to put on her bed-gown. She dressed with little nervous jerks of the arms and head, anxious now to hide herself from the stranger in the mirror. .

Then she turned to the Virgin and prayed.

'I love him, Mary,' she said. 'Let him be mine. Open my father's eyes to my love for this young man. Let me be happy. If I am happy, I shall not be frightened. For I am frightened of suffering. Do not let me be frightened. . . .'

As she turned to the bed she heard her father's footsteps on the stairs. She had been so preoccupied that she had not heard him close up the shop.

She had just got into the bed and drawn the coverlet over her when he knocked on the door.

She wished now she had locked the door when she had come in, before she had started to undress. She might even have left it locked all night.

The door opened and for a full minute her father stood regarding her from the foot of the bed. He was between her and the candle, and she noticed, in that interval, how old and thin he was. His emaciation wrung her heart. His shoulders, sloping into the hollows at the base of his neck, appeared as insubstantial as his own shadow on the wall.

'You have disobeyed me again tonight,' he said. His voice was low, hardly more than a whisper. It was a gentle reprimand.

'You are my only child,' he said, after a pause during which he looked as if he expected her to speak. 'And it is right what I do for my child and daughter. Do you think I did not recognize him in the shop? When you told me you had to go out, you did not tell me why you had to go and leave me on my own in the shop. Do you think I did not know that you were going to meet him?'

He moved from his position until he stood over her. She saw the deep lines on his face, but his eyes she could not see properly for they were hidden in shadow.-

'I have been kind to you, Lucia,' he went on. 'I have been a good father. I sent you to school and you have studied and learnt many things. But I would have done none of these things if I had known that you would make such a fool of yourself—and a fool of me—with people like him!'

She was crying now, but to herself so that he would not

notice. Her tears were hot and smarting because they were silent. She thought of the stranger in the mirror, and it made her weep with fear.

'Look at me, child,' he said, with the first signs of exasperation in his voice. 'I know what I'm saying. I know these people. For generations they have sucked our country dry, played about with our women and stolen their honour. With their money and their titles they have made imbeciles of us. Lucia, look at me.'

He put out a hand, cupped it under her chin and pulled her face round. His fingers trembled feeling the tears on them.

'It must not go on,' he said vehemently, 'this . . . this escapade, do you hear, child? Your father commands you. You are so young and inexperienced, my God, and he . . . he . . . even at this moment he is gloating over his easy capture. That's what they do. They have no heart for our kind. Don't ever think that they have!'

He withdrew his hand suddenly from her face and with a quick movement, tore back the bed-covers and threw them in a heap on the floor.

In anguish, Lucia coiled her body in the centre of the bed, but she could not escape from his hand.

'Come,' he said, pulling her towards him. 'Come, swear before the Virgin, swear that you will do nothing to encourage him. Swear to the Holy Mother of God that you will have nothing to do with him or any other of his sort.'

She tried to resist him but his fingers were locked tightly over her wrist.

'Swear!'

The candlelight, though dim, hurt her eyes, and she turned her face and rested her forehead against his arm. She felt his body trembling and heard his teeth chattering as if with cold.

The hatred which possessed him was something she had never experienced before. It was appalling. In a moment she lost her fear and could think again. She wished it was all over. She wished she could do what he ordered. But as she looked, calm now in the face of this hideous hatred, the sight of the

colourful Virgin seemed something too cold and separate even to contemplate.

She disengaged her wrist from his grip. She was surprised at the ease with which she did it; then, without a word, she went and turned on the light.

The room lighted up with harsh suddenness, so sudden was it that he put up his hands to his eyes as if he had been struck.

'I cannot swear to that, father,' she said calmly, 'for I remember how much you loved my mother, and how happy you were together. It would be like swearing my mother's happiness away, and yours.' She opened the door. 'Please, go now, father. It is already very late, and tomorrow is Sunday and we both shall have a lot to do.'

After he had gone she remained awake for a long time.

There was no bitterness in her heart. But, strangely perhaps, a warmth for what she remembered was good and wholesome.

It was her parents' love for each other that she recalled now; her father's unbroken agony for many years after her mother had died; and the daily thrill when she was still alive.

Her mother had come from a rich family, well-favoured in society; a highly gifted and spirited woman who had forfeited family and wealth to love and marry the man of her choice. This man was lowly in birth and circumstances, and she had taken him even in the face of her family's wrath and spite.

Perhaps her father had never really forgotten this.

That was why she could not feel any bitterness against him.

CHAPTER II

I

It was Sunday, and the Church of St Paul Shipwreck was crowded for the six o'clock Mass. The light in the church was dim; long, fat shadows of pillar and cornice lay static over the heads of the people and stretched towards the fine paintings on the arched ceiling. The sweet, sickly smell of incense pervaded this house of God, suppressing, but for a fraction, the sweeter and sicklier smell of human bodies. The drone of prayers was like a half-hearted wind, punctuated by short, dry coughs from many throats parched from their fast and the cloying fumes of incense and human sweat.

Dun Saver was hearing confession in his usual confessional opposite the altar of St Francis.

Dun Saver, old and afflicted with encroaching deafness, had in his lifetime heard nearly all the impossible and improbable sins that humanity was capable of inflicting on itself, so that he had reached a stage in his profession when nothing really surprised or shocked him any more.

He sat in the snug gloom of the oaken confessional, his old, shrivelled head resting against the small zinc grate, his hands clasped on his lap, and listened to the timid outpourings of the faithful.

Long ago, at the start of his priesthood, Dun Saver had done everything possible to make his superiors exempt him from hearing confessions. He had felt from the beginning the tremendous burden of the undertaking and was frightened by its implications. This situation was further aggravated by his certain belief that every sin, not merely symbolically, but literally, drove a long, thick, cruel nail into the hands or feet of the Lord. The thought that he had personally to remove this weapon of torture from God's living flesh was an excruciating torment.

That was why, when he had at last reluctantly passed all



the examination that conferred on him the privilege of a Father Confessor, he had insisted on hearing confessions in no other confessional but the one in St Francis's Chapel.

The reason was simple: from this confessional no image of the Crucified Christ was visible!

2

Lucia had allowed those women who had come after her to precede her to confession, so that she might be last.

When her turn finally came, she rose from her chair, walked to the confessional and knelt at the grate.

She crossed herself and said: 'I need your help, Dun Saver.'

'There was a movement inside the box as if Dun Saver had changed his position.

'You are Lucia, are you not?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Is your father keeping well?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Are you still good to him?'

'Yes, Father.'

'And feed him well, and help him in the shop?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Then prepare yourself for the absolution, my daughter. *Te absolvo . . .*'

'But . . .'

'Did you speak?'

'Yes . . .'

'Is there perhaps something else that you want to tell me?'

'Yes, Father.'

Dun Saver felt a little surprise. He had known Lucia since she was a day old—he himself had baptized her. And ever since her seventh birthday she had come to him for confession. It had never taken long and he had sent her off with a penance of never more than two Hail Mary's.

So he was surprised to hear Lucia, for the first time since he had known her, wanting to tell him 'something else'.

He was suddenly aware for the first time that Lucia had grown up. It made him a little sad to think of it.

'How old are you now, my child?

'Nineteen.'

'Ah, nineteen. Nineteen, do you say? . . . Well, now, what is it you have to tell me?'

'I love a young man.'

'Ah!'

'I love him very much.'

'Does he reciprocate your feelings?'

'He has told me that he loves me.'

'Ah!'

'But I am sorely troubled.'

'Is he a good, Christian youth?'

'Oh, he is. I am sure he is.'

'You do not sound too convincing.'

'I . . . I mean he is of my religion, and he carries the Rosary in his pocket; he showed it to me once. It was ivory, my Father!'

'Of ivory! . . . But, tell me, my daughter, is he then a source of worry to you?'

'Oh no, Father.'

'What is it then?'

'It is my father. He hates him.'

'Ah!'

'It is because John—that is the young man's name—comes from a high-class family. That is why my father hates him.'

'Your father is an ass.' He spoke with sudden exasperation. 'All this class-hatred—it is a curse. But you, Lucia, have you really and truly searched your heart?'

'I love him, my Father.'

'And are you certain that it is only because . . . because of this feeling of class that your father fails to countenance the young man in question?'

'I am certain it is the reason. You see, Duh Saver, after the way my mother was treated by her people after she married my father & .

'Quite, quite. I see everything clearly.' There was a pause while Dun Saver recalled the trouble he had gone through trying to heal the breach between Lucia's father and mother on one side and the mother's family on the other. It had been no use. His failure had been the biggest disappointment in a life of disappointments; for to Dun Saver, disappointments came as regularly as the seasons.

And while he was thinking of that unfortunate business, Dun Saver felt in his heart the spark of rebellion. There was enough class-hatred as it was. One solution to it was, as he saw it now in a flash of inspiration, more marriages between the two sections of society.

The Crucified Christ had died to achieve, among other things, this very end. All men belonged to one society, that of the Kingdom. All other divisions of society were man-made and the work of the arch-enemy. Dun Saver was not a learned man, as he himself would have instantly admitted; but at least he knew where some of the remedies for humanity's ills lay.

He pressed his face to the grate.

'Lucia, are you listening?' he asked.

'Yes, Father.'

'I venture to ask you the name of this young man.'

'His name is John. John Xiberras de Balyard.'

'Xiberras! You don't say Xiberras de Balyard!' His voice held an exultant note. 'He . . . he belongs to one of our best families; and, mark you, best not merely in material goods, but also in common sense and the right Christian spirit. Child, I am glad for you, very glad!'

He had not had such a confession as this for a long, long time. His imagination, all but dead after years of frustration and routine, flared up from its own ashes. A son of the Xiberras de Balyard marrying a daughter, a beautiful, honest, pious daughter of the working class! What would such a union not do to heal some, if not all, of the spite and hatred that existed between the country's spheres of society? . . .

'Listen to me carefully, child,' he said, hardly able to speak with emotion and gratitude; for never had he felt so fired with

the Holy One. 'You leave your father to me! As for you, my daughter, I enjoin you to be discreet, but you may continue to love this young man, for your conscience is free and unsullied. I see quite clearly the hand of God in this.'

'My father watches me day and night.'

'Have I not just told you to leave your father to me?' he said in mild exasperation. 'It may take time, but I shall do it. As for the young man's people, you need not fret yourself over them. They are kind, God-fearing men and women, and when they see your John decided in his love for you, they will immediately acquiesce . . . But come, let us finish this confession and continue our talk in the sacristy. So go now in peace, my daughter. As for penance, well . . . er . . . say two Hail Mary's . . . *Te absolvo in nomine patris, et filii, et spiritus sancti* . . . Go.'

CHAPTER IV

On Sundays Toni, Lucia's father, only opened his shop for a few hours in the evening.

On this particular Sunday the weather was hot and sultry, although late November. The people called it St Martin's Summer, two or three weeks of summery weather that divided autumn from winter.

It had been a dry autumn, too; the roads were dusty, the leaves of the orange trees were not as dark as they usually were at this time of the year and the fruit-crop sparse. Wind-fallen tangerines lay on the soil, rotting slowly.

The grit from the roads and the unnatural weather, as well as his worry over his daughter, had brought on Toni's old stomach ailment again. He had been in pain all day. It was not a racking pain but rather a continuous ache that lay like a tight belt across his stomach making sitting uncomfortable and walking an effort.

The ache had started as a pain early that morning while he was at Mass. It had come suddenly, and it was so intense that he had wondered whether he would be able to hear the Mass right through. After the Consecration, however, during which he had been forced to remain seated, the pain had subsided a little and only this dull, oppressive ache remained.

After Mass he was surprised to find that he could walk without doubling over with the pain. He found Lucia busy in the shop, passed through hurriedly, and went directly up to his room. There he loosened his trousers and lay back on the bed, gasping for breath. Grey globules of perspiration stood out on his face: he felt too weak to do anything about them.

He remained like this for quite a time, waiting for the discomfort to wear off as it usually did. But it persisted and he wondered if it would ever leave him. . . .

Later in the day, men's voices from the shop reached his ears in irritating undertones. He could hear the tinkle of glasses, a sudden laugh, the inexpert strumming of a guitar. . . . He

waited until his stomach was completely numbed and, rising from the bed, did up his trousers again and went downstairs. In the shop, he perched himself on the high stool behind the counter and lit a cheroot.

He felt tired and irritable. He drank some gin which burned a hole through the numbness so that he thought he was about to fall. Then he threw away his half-smoked cheroot and concentrated on swearing at the customers and at his daughter.

Of course, he told himself, it's all this worry over the girl. He watched her closely as she worked, and the next instant regretted he had allowed himself to think of her. For he was immediately reminded of her mother, that gay, exquisite creature he had stolen from a family which had never forgiven him; a family which had filled him with hate for them and all their kind.

The memory of his wife was so great an agony to him that he almost forgot the burning fions inside his stomach.

Now watching Lucia, thinking of her at night, he sensed the terrible danger she was in.

If this infatuation of hers continued, what would be the outcome? Even if this man's family gave their consent, would he, like her mother, succeed in putting everything behind him? Would his love for Lucia always be strong enough to prevent him regretting all that he would be giving up for her sake? Would he love her as her mother had loved her father?

He knew that such a thing was impossible. Love like that was a thing too rare to be experienced twice in a lifetime!

If only the damned girl would stop a bit and try to understand what it meant to be born at the lower end of the social scale. It was all very well for people to preach equality. Those at the bottom wanted to be equal, but what about those on top? And yet, strange as it might seem, it was those on top who came out with all the fine speeches about the so-called Christian spirit.

• Christian spirit! Toni felt a contraction in his chest that was, momentarily, as painful as that in his stomach. Their Christian spirit!

Toni had heard that in some countries things were not so bad, that class-hatred was outdated—a thing of the iniquitous past. He did not know if this was true. But it was not true where his own country was concerned. There were many things that needed changing completely here.

And the time will come, he said savagely to himself, as he felt the red-hot twinges again. Soon we shall have our own Labour Government. Then we shall see; soon there will be a bloody hell of a change!

After the pain came a little clarity. He was not surprised to discover that the vehemence of his politics was engendered not so much by any real patriotic feelings as by the hatred he harboured for his wife's people.

They had rolled in money, and she had been the only daughter.

Yet none of them had come to see her buried. They had their family vault at the L'Addolorata cemetery, under the tall cypress trees. Its opening was sculpted in angels and sheaves of corn. And on each anniversary they paid for Masses to be said for their dead in all the parish churches of Malta.

Their daughter's grave was under an ordinary slab of limestone. No one knelt on that stone but he and Lucia on November 2 of each year. He could not even pray properly then, on that stone among the weeds; he could not pray, so great was the anger in him. And the Masses he could afford for her were no more than two a year—two Masses celebrated tonelessly by Dun Saver in the chapel of St Francis in the Church of St Paul Shipwreck. . .

CHAPTER IV

I

The Café Premier had a deserted air on most afternoons, but never more so than a Sunday afternoon.

By evening, these tables would fill with people: waiters in their black-and-white livery, with their sleek hair and balanced walk, would swerve expertly over sprawling legs and jutting shoulders and elbows.

In the afternoon, however, the Café presented a faded, deserted scene.

Lieutenant John Xiberras de Balyard sat at one of the tables on this Sunday afternoon. He was in civilian clothes, his walking stick—such an indispensable accessory to the officer gentlemen of the Island's Regiment—laid across the seat of another chair.

He was waiting for a miracle to happen. He was saying to himself, I may see her. If I wait here long enough, I may see her turning that corner and I'll go to her and, whatever she may say, we'll go somewhere, away from all this, where we can be alone.

A pigeon pitched near his feet. It pecked purposelessly at the ground and the red iron leg of the table. He watched it wobbling and nodding; its total unconcern made him unaccountably aware of himself. He could have laughed, bitterly—here he was, moonshining, just like a kid playing with day-dreams, waiting for miracles. He looked nervously about him as if he had shouted his thoughts. The shadows under the arches were empty and still. . . . The pigeon flew off with a clattering of wings that was mildly derisive. Waiting for a miracle!

He rose hurriedly and self-consciously, picked up his stick and walked off. He kept to the shade down one side of the narrow, twisted streets of the city leading to Marsamxett Harbour until at last he stopped on the pavement opposite her

house. The shop was closed, the street deserted. He had a feeling of failure, a sense of utter incompleteness that left him breathless. Just like a moonstruck child he was relying too much on miracles. That was the trouble. He leaned heavily on his stick on this shaded pavement and his eyes fixed on the stark sunlight that suffused in a clayey glare the house opposite.

He was not sleeping too well nowadays. Often he woke up in the morning feeling tired and debauched, trying desperately to shake off the memory of her. He would say to himself: If ever I see her again, I shall pass her by without a single glance. She's nothing to me. I don't even want to sleep with her. She's pretty but I know others just as pretty and, with them, there won't be this torment.

But it was useless thinking such thoughts. He knew he could not do without her; she had grown on him, whether he liked it or not. He wished to God he had never set eyes on her. . . . It was one of those things.

A child, tousle-haired and nut-brown, emerged from a doorway a little way away and ran towards him. In his hands he held a kite, a large one made up of about half a dozen different colours.

'Hello, mister,' said the child.

John looked down at him, saw the faint after-marks of the measles rash and the mischief in the eyes. Then he straightened himself up again and felt an utter fool, standing there in the quiet street, being surveyed by a child with a ridiculous kite in his hands and mischief in his eyes. He turned away.

'Got any money, mister?' the child asked, keeping pace with him.

John stopped and turned, and smiled against his will.

'I have.'

'Give me threepence.'

'What do you want threepence for?'

'For a ball of string. I can't fly this kite without string, can I?'

'You're right. You can't.'

He put his hand in his pocket and drew three pennies out.

The sooner he could get rid of this boy the better he would feel.

'Here,' he said.

The boy grabbed the money and jingled it in his hand.

'Thanks, mister,' he said. 'Now I'll go and tell Lucia you're here.'

John almost ~~fe~~eled backwards.

'What did you say?'

The boy's eyes danced. 'My mother saw you from our balcony. She said: "That's Lucia's young man, but he's frightened to go to her because of Toni. Toni'd skin him alive if he caught him near her."' '

'Your mother,' said John weakly. He jerked towards the boy's house. He could see no one; but he noticed that, although all the balcony curtains were drawn, yet one of them seemed to be drawn just a little too tightly.

'I'll go and tell Lucia, eh?' the boy said, turning to go.

'Wait,' said John.

He tried to think clearly, but the boy's dancing eyes made it difficult. He felt he was being made a fool of. If he was not careful he would have an audience, too—and not just the boy and his mother.

'I'll go, no?', the boy said. 'It's worth the threepence you gave me.'

'You'll do nothing of the sort,' he told the boy crossly.

He saw the boy suddenly look up to his mother's balcony. John turned too, just in time to see a woman's head nodding violently and a hand making quick gestures towards Lucia's house.

'That's my mother,' the boy said proudly. 'She says I must go and tell Lucia, otherwise I must give you the money back. And I want my string.'

That's how it was. He had to admit defeat. Without another word he walked off and turned the corner. That the boy would do as his mother had told him he felt perfectly sure.

His ears burned as he walked. Then suddenly he stopped and the ludicrousness of the situation hit him. He nearly

laughed aloud and was thankful for his good fortune. That boy might do his part well yet!

He retraced his steps slowly until he came to the corner round which he had turned so panic-stricken barely two minutes before. He did not have long to wait.

She came to him almost running. Her face was flushed. She looked indescribably pretty, and his heart stood still. Oh God, oh God, he said to himself.

He took her hand.

'I mustn't be long,' she said. 'I left my father asleep. He is not very well.'

'We needn't go far from here, Lucia.'

'But . . .'

'I promise you we'll not be long. I promise you, Lucia. I've wanted to see you so much.'

She looked undecided at first; her eyes were anxious. Then she squeezed his hand.

'Come,' he said delightedly. 'We'll be together, even if it is for such a short while.'

She went with him and, though she had removed her hand from his, yet, when she walked, she kept close to him.

Watching them from the corner was the little boy. He was smiling broadly and jingling his pennies.

He was a mere child and therefore could not have understood, even had he been told, the mischief he had done. But neither the lovers nor anyone else knew what mischief had been wrought on that silent afternoon. Otherwise, they would not have walked so eagerly to meet what fate held in store for them at the Upper Barracca.

2

There they found a cool, secluded spot. Directly below the Barracca lay the Grand Harbour, with the sea shimmering in the sun, and the long grey lines of the warships tranquil and supine in this hour of siesta.

Before them the ancient bastions of St Michael and St Angelo appeared golden yellow. The church steeples of the

historic Three Cities, across the narrow water, looked in the drowsy light like the turrets of a promised land. A B.E.A. aircraft, its undercarriage ready for landing, shredded the silence to close it again behind the blue hills of Zejtun where the aerodrome was situated.

He could feel her body warm and quivering and, as he put his face against hers, he sensed the virgin querulousness of her flesh. But, even as he held her, he was tortured by the thought: Where from here?

When he had first met her there had been no such soul-searching. He had accepted her immediately, undoubtedly: there had been no looking into the future then. He had been leaving Fort St Elmo for two days' leave when at the gate his eyes had fallen upon her.

She was carrying a large wicker basket full of wine-bottles. She had appeared ill at ease, and he had stopped to inquire what she wanted.

'I've brought this wine for the Captain . . .' she began.

'Oh, I see.' The Captain preferred his wine home-made; he would have none of these mass-produced concoctions. He smiled. 'Do you usually bring it yourself? I don't remember ever seeing you around here before.'

The girl's face had turned an exquisite pink colour and he had sworn to himself that he had never seen a face half so pretty and appealing.

'I brought it,' she had replied, 'because the boy who usually brings it is ill, and . . . and so my father sent me instead. I don't know what to do now or who I am supposed to give it to.'

At the exclusive school to which his parents had sent him, and later at Sandhurst, a measure of self-control had been drilled into him. But he had never come across a challenge such as this—the challenge of innocence: large, brown appealing eyes, and a skin he would have loved to touch.

'I see,' he had said with effort. 'If you give me the basket, I'll see that the right man gets it. Please wait here. I'll be back with your basket in no time.'

He took the basket from her, hurried across the forecourt, left the bottles with an orderly and quickly returned to the gate. She had not moved from her position.

'Well,' he said, 'I've given them your wine.'

The resolution to walk part of the way with her had been the easiest he had ever made. He had learnt her name and the exact position of her house.

Later, at his mother's villa, he had felt restless. In the evening he had gone down to Valletta, and entered her father's shop. There for the first time he had felt the enmity of her father.

When two days later he had met her in Kingsway he had lost no time. He had made an appointment to see her that evening. She had kept it, though for not more than fifteen minutes.

But those fifteen minutes with her, on a park bench on the northern ramparts of the citadel, had been a revelation to him. With her, he had known a sweetness and a strange peace he had never experienced before. Three days later they had met again, at dusk, and at the end, before they parted, he had kissed her.

He had kissed other girls before; it was nothing new to him. He had kissed Lucia on the lips, with the assured and practised air of a man with decided views, conscious of her small, hard breasts against his chest. With that kiss, he had lost his studied self-assurance; the complete innocence and freshness of her kiss had left him dazed. Then she had gone and left him with an indescribable joy. Then he felt fear: a wild, momentary fear that made his joy almost too great to bear. That was why he did not sleep well any more and rose with a desire, swiftly come and gone, not to have anything to do with her! . . .

Now again, in this secluded spot, there was fear in his joy and anxiety to know where all this was leading.

Echoing his thoughts, she said: 'I'm afraid.'

He rose and drew her to him.

'Listen, Lucia,' he said, 'whatever happens, we have each other. We must not be afraid.'

There he went again. Afraid . . . afraid . . . And now he could

not completely shut his eyes from its presence. It seemed to be everywhere. The sun no longer warmed; the ships looked hideously naked; the bastions across the harbour, massive, ugly and frowning; and there was a breath of bitter chill that came from the arid stretch of sea beyond the breakwater, stretching to an eternity of doubt—and fear!

He held Lucia close to him and as the scene grew dark and ominous before his eyes, and he almost lost touch of her, he became aware of one indisputable thing: he loved her. He was certain of that now. He loved her with all his heart; this was not just another soldier's *affaire*. The whole of his past and his upbringing, whence the fear sprang, suddenly seemed quite unreal to him. Only this was real: his love.

She was crying quietly. He tightened his arms around her, feeling, beneath her fear, her love for him.

He could not believe his good fortune. . . .

It was late afternoon when they made their way out of the Barracca. People had begun to enter the garden—mothers with their prams, old men with their memories, youths full of anticipation of the long dark evening.

Two women, one older than the other and better poised and dressed, watched from their seat as the two lovers left the garden hand-in-hand. Then they looked at each other, open-mouthed and speechless with amazement.

The little girl who was with them played gleefully with a ball of many colours.

3

Lucia heard voices coming from the room behind the shop. She stood in the hall listening, conscious of being late and the fact that when she had set out to meet John, her father had been in his bed. She studied her face in the mirror on the hat-stand and saw how pale she was. Her hands were trembling.

She could hear the two voices quite distinctly now: her father's deep-toned, rumbling, harsh, and the other's argumentative, pleading and emphatic by turn.

She knew they were discussing her, and wished to be left alone. Upstairs she would weigh this love and this fear in peace. She would do it unaided.

She made for the stairs, making as little noise as possible. But just as she laid her hand on the small brass knob at the bottom of the banisters, the door of the room opened and her father appeared before her.

Even though he stood with his back to the light that came from the small window in the room, she could see his face clearly. How pale he was, like a walking death! The sight saddened her.

'So,' he said, 'you are back.'

She made a slight, apologetic gesture with her hand. 'I'm sorry I am late, father,' she said.

'Come in here,' he said, and moved from the door to let her pass.

Dun Saver was there, sitting in the old, faded, unsprung armchair usually taken by her father. The old priest's eyes were closed and the forefingers and thumbs of his hands formed a diamond shape under his chin. His face sagged and the flesh round his thin, pointed nose was grey.

That is how he will look when he is dead, she thought.

Her father closed the door behind her and went to sit on the wicker-seated chair near the window. Directly above his head hung a bundle of gleaming mauve onions, fat and obscene in their tight shining skins. They were barely nine inches above Toni, and for one inexplicable moment she thought she was going to see them come crashing down on his head.

She could hardly take her eyes away from those onions; she could not help making the contrast between their fatness and her father's tiny, spent head.

The notion came to her: If those things fell, they would kill him!

'Your father is a stupid, obstinate ass,' Dun Saver had opened his eyes and was looking straight at her. She was surprised to see a flicker of life in the priest's eyes. A moment ago he was as good as dead. . . .

'He will not listen to reason,' the priest went on. 'And he is so set in his evil ways that he refuses to realize the damage he is doing and the good that he can certainly do.'

Her father brought his fist down on the table with an echoing thump. (*Now, now the onions must surely fall!*)

'I have my own good reasons, 'reverend,' he said. 'I am saving my daughter from a cruel destiny'.

'Rubbish,' retorted the priest. 'What do you know of destiny? I tell you this love of your daughter for the young man can bring nothing but good. Do I not know your daughter's heart? Have I not had my fingers on her pulse ever since she was that high? Am I not, perhaps, in a better position than you to know what good she can bring about? And her love is good and the good that is of her love will multiply. Multiply, I tell you. It can do nothing but multiply, this good that springs from her love!'

He spoke heatedly, stressing nearly every word and jabbing a long, thin finger at the air that separated him from Toni.

'You talk in the riddles of the confessional,' said her father, glaring at the priest. (*He must not shout or he will bring the onions down. Why does he not control himself before it is too late?*)

'You do not know what you are saying,' said Dun Saver. 'You are nothing but a heathen.'

As if stung by this last remark, Toni rose abruptly from his chair. He turned to her.

'Come here, Lucia,' he said.

She made a step towards him.

His breath was coming in quick gasps and he had one hand laid flat across the pit of his stomach. He was deathly pale.

'You know the story of your mother, Lucia,' he said. 'You know how they hated her for coming to me . . .'

'But that proves nothing,' Dun Saver interposed.

'Permit me,' Toni shouted without looking at the priest. 'I know what is good for my daughter. She will have nothing to do with this man. He is my enemy.'

'But you yourself admitted,' Dun Saver said, 'that you know

nothing about him, apart from seeing him once or twice.'

'I know his kind, and that is enough. They killed my wife. Even in her happiness, I tell you, the thing was eating her heart out. They killed her but they won't kill my daughter. If I ever catch him hanging around here again, I'll kill him. As for you, Lucia . . .' He gripped her arm. 'You were with him this afternoon,' he said. 'You were with him. Don't deny it.'

'Toni, in the name of the Holy Virgin, control yourself,' the priest pleaded, but his voice was hardly audible, so weak it was.

'Deny it if you can.'

'I am not going to deny it, father,' she said in a dead voice.

His fist meant for her face fell instead on the side of her neck.

Then he was on the floor with his back pressed against one of the table legs, clutching his stomach with both hands, ripping his shirt open and tearing at his trousers in his agony.

She reached him before the priest, and pressed him to her.

He turned sweat-beaded eyes on the priest and said between pain-gritted teeth: 'You're a good man, you poor fool. Pity there ain't many more like you. But you'll see who's right about Lucia! You'll see . . .'

He stopped with a gasp and his eyes rolled glazedly and his voice was a hard and difficult grating. 'Go on,' he said, 'give me your absolution, for I think I'm going to die.'

CHAPTER VI

I

The Countess Ermeline de Xiberras de Balyard was a spare, neat woman. Although now in her fifties, her features were still fine, her eyes were large, blue and clear; her hair had lost none of its original lustre except that the rich auburn of her youth had changed to a flawless silver.

She possessed all the poise and elegance of women of her station. She carried herself with a demeanour that was proud without being offensively arrogant, and humble without being too contrite.

It was only in rare unguarded moments that her eyes betrayed a sadness altogether alien to their customary serenity. Sadness that came and went like a flicker of pained recognition. Sadness that was all the more deep because its sign in her eyes was fine and transitory.

For all her twenty-five years in Malta, the Countess had never really forgotten her father's estate in Provence.

She had met her husband during one of his many trips to the Continent. As a young man the Count had made the study of the Knights of Malta his prevailing passion and had combed nearly all Europe in his insatiable search for more and more information about their origins.

Great had been the Count's joy when, on a visit to Provence twenty-five years ago he came upon a family which traced its direct descent from a Knight of Malta. A Knight, moreover, who had stood at the right hand of Grandmaster Jean-Parisotte de la Valette during the Great Siege of 1565 when the great Armada of the Ottoman shattered on the bastions and rocks of Malta—a memorable Christian victory.

The Count's sojourn with his illustrious family had been so pleasant that, when he returned to Malta, he carried back with him not only important historical data but also the eldest daughter of the de Balyards.

The Countess Erhelinde had taken to her new home and life with the greatest of enthusiasm and interest. In those early days, the spirit of her adventurous and highly gifted ancestor, Gaspard de Balyard, had been strong in her, and with her husband she had gone over again and again the great part he had played in the shaping of this small island that was now her home.

However, once homesickness came to her, she never really lost it; none the less, true to her breeding and family standards, she never attempted to leave her husband.

On the whole, circumstances had been kind to her. She had developed an intimate acquaintance with the leading families of the Island. During the 1939-45 War, she had worked tirelessly with other ladies in the relief of the hungry and the bombed. She had even consigned two of her husband's villas to the housing of refugees from the bombed cities. She had distributed blankets, washed and dressed wounds, looked after orphan babies, organized relief-kitchens and given money to hundreds of unfortunate people. By this great humanitarian work she earned the regard of people in all walks of life.

After the war, at a time when memories of Provence threatened once more to disturb her peace of mind, she devoted herself to various works of peacetime charity. She joined a Mothers' Association, the Girl Guide Movement and a Committee who laboured in the interests of fallen women. Her name came to spell charity, goodness of heart and unselfish love.

Her friends loved and respected her: her servants worshipped the ground she trod on. Immersed as she was in philanthropic work and surrounded by numerous friends and well-wishers, she could afford now and then to forget some of the more harrowing experiences of her life—the sum total of which was her self-imposed exile from the beloved land of Provence.

Her marriage to the Count had been graced with the birth of a son and a daughter.

Her son, John, was the younger of the two children. She

had not really wished him to enter the army. She had seen too much suffering during the war to felish the idea of her only son having any connection with the hateful business. But, seeing her son was bent on such a career, she had at last acquiesced. In point of fact, after his return from Sandhurst, where he had earned his commission, she felt justly proud of him. Evidently, 'the de Balyard blood was in his veins.

The daughter's name was Yvette; she perhaps more than John seemed to have inherited most of the qualities and features of the de Balyards. She was tall, distinctive-looking to a great degree, arrogant in a piquant fashion and, of course, very beautiful.

Yvette was now twenty-four and two years older than her brother. She had married when she was twenty-one.

And it was Yvette who was announced to the Countess Ermeline on this cloudy afternoon. The Countess was in the garden, seeing to her roses, when her daughter came to her.

As Yvette, who lived in Valletta, often drove over in her car to her parents' villa at St Julian's, the Countess did not at first consider the visit as anything out of the ordinary. But it was not long before she became aware that there was something wrong as Yvette, normally so effusive when with her mother, was today almost unnaturally silent.

The Countess turned from the roses and surveyed her daughter.

'Is anything the matter, dear?' she asked, placing the shears in her basket.

Yvette shrugged her shoulders in her usual pretty fashion. 'I don't know myself,' she replied.

The Countess laid a white hand on her daughter's arm.

'You look worried, Yvette,' she said. 'Come inside and tell me what is on your mind.'

The Countess's curiosity was now completely roused. She picked up the garden basket and walked into the house with Yvette.

'Shall I call for some tea?' she asked, hardly able to conceal her anxiety.

'No . . . no, thank you, mother,' replied Yvette. 'Perhaps later.'

At first, the Countess was too surprised to feel any emotion, one way or the other. She felt, in fact, quite relieved that Yvette had nothing more serious to report.

'When was this?' she asked.

'Last Sunday. We were watching them for over five minutes. Of course, as I told you, he didn't see us, which perhaps was just as well. I didn't give it any real importance just then, in fact I was rather amused. It's not often that one catches one's own brother making love to a girl. It was when I began to notice how they looked at each other that I felt differently. Then, to top it all, the maid told me who she was.'

'Ah, the maid.'

'It was Marijann who noticed them in the first place.'

'And Marijann said that she recognized the girl?'

'Immediately. In fact, they both . . . they both appear to live in the same quarter of the town . . . Mother, what are we going to do?'

'Do?' echoed the Countess, suddenly feeling very sad at the thought of the roses she had cut that afternoon. 'I could never quite get used to cutting roses off the tree,' she said.

'Mother, you are not listening!' cried Yvette in faint annoyance.

'I am listening, my dear,' the Countess said. 'But I must think properly. You must not hurry me.'

'The girl is positively common,' remarked Yvette. 'Her father keeps some sort of a shop, and she's always there serving wine to the men. We must stop John before he makes a fool of himself. Can't you see?'

The Countess thought that she had never seen Yvette look so much a de Balyard as she did now. In her daughter's voice, she could almost hear her own father telling her to straighten her shoulders a little more if she wanted to look like a real de Balyard. . . .

So long ago, so long ago. In a country of wide green and

gay song and the pleasures of a childhood and a youth that had faded into the dim, distant vision of Provence.

2

Count Thomas Xiberras gave an affectionate pat with his finger to the Venezuelan cigar-band he had just inserted in the album and removed his glasses. Myopically, he looked out into the garden below.

Evening was drawing near, and there was the touch of rain in the air.

'We need it badly, too,' he remarked to himself. 'The garden could do with a night of rain.'

Barely an hour ago, he had seen his daughter talking to her mother. Seeing her, he had felt a slight irritation; when he was with his cigar-bands, he did not relish any sort of interruption. This afternoon especially he had had quite a lot to do: the late post had brought him cigar-bands from correspondents in Bolivia, Cologne, Basle and Venezuela. It had taken him nearly three hours to sort them all out, catalogue them, and enter them in the thick, red-vellumed album.

He had prayed silently that Yvette would give him a miss, just this once.

He need not have worried. Both Yvette and his wife were apparently oblivious of his presence, and he was more than thankful.

When fear of interruption had receded entirely, he crept back to his cigar-bands with renewed relish and a short, brisk rub of his hands.

It was after he had locked the album away and stood contemplating the gathering storm outside that he became conscious of a sense of misgiving.

He suddenly realized that the house was strangely, almost oppressively silent. Yvette must have left! That was strange, for he could not imagine Yvette leaving without bidding him goodnight!

The thought disturbed him and he felt a little compunction and a certain amount of guilt; perhaps, after all, he should

have called her up or even gone downstairs to see her just for a second while she was still in the house. . . .

He crossed to the window and leaned out over the sill, half expecting to hear his daughter's voice again. But everything was quiet and the lights in the lounge had been extinguished.

He was on the point of turning away from the window when he saw something moving in the dusk around the pagoda. He could not make it out at first, then as it moved and entered the oblong of light which the light in his own room threw on the garden-floor, he realized that it was his wife.

A drop of rain fell pat on the back of his hand on the windowsill. He could hear other drops striking the leaves. The sky had gone inky black.

'Ermelinde,' he called. 'It has started to rain. Had you not better come indoors?'

He saw her lift her head and look at him, but she did not seem to have heard him, for she said nothing in reply. She stood still just inside the lighted oblong, in her white dress and uncovered head.

'I say, Ermelinde,' he said. 'Had you not better come indoors? You will be soaked through.'

After what appeared to him as an unnecessarily long interval, she moved, crossed the light and disappeared below.

The Count felt instinctively that something was wrong. He closed the window, glanced cursorily over his desk, and, finding everything in its proper place, put out the light and went downstairs.

His wife was in the sitting-room, sitting in an armchair and doing nothing else. . . .

He was more perplexed than ever. He could not remember when he had last seen his wife in such an inactive mood and posture. She had always been an exceptionally active woman, and he had long ago taught himself certain devices by which he could avoid her rush and bustle in the house without making it too obvious that, as time passed, he was finding it increasingly necessary to be alone and undisturbed.

Quickly he walked over to her, his small legs scissoring

the distance with an agility that belied his sixty years.

'Is anything the matter, Ermeline, my dear?' he asked.

She looked at him with a start of her head, as if she had not expected him to be there.

'Thomas,' she said, 'we must do something before it is too late.'

He stared down at her. 'I do not understand,' he said.

This was the first time in more years than he cared to remember that his wife had appealed to him for his counsel. His head reeled and he gaped at her. 'We must do something,' she had said. We! He felt the implication as a sort of mysterious door being opened for him. It had not been like that for a long, long time.

He had long learnt to regard his wife as a self-sufficient woman, capable of looking after herself and doing things without his help. He was even perfectly sure that things were done better without him. He had discovered his limitations quite early in his married life—and, somehow, he had been thankful.

Because of this and the consonant difference in temperament between himself and his wife, he had been able to create a life of his own, upstairs in his room, first with the history of the origin of the Knights of St John and then with his collection of cigar-bands. He had wanted nothing better in life.

In the old days, he had been passionate with her and it had cut him to the raw when he had reached so quickly the basic frigid element in her. When they had taken to occupying separate beds he had known a few months' bitterness and frustration. But even that had passed. His innate love of solitude had reshaped his life from a pattern of desire and passion to one of slow, comfortable existence, in which the only demands he made were on himself.

He was therefore quite unprepared for the story his wife unfolded to him. He loved his children with that calm, detached passion of a parent who believes that children will one day grow up and follow a set line of behaviour from which there can be no possible deviation: what his wife was

telling him now was so utterly at variance with all he had ever believed that he was not a little shaken, in fact more shaken than his wife appeared to be.

He had always been proud of John. He had always taken it for granted that one day his son would succeed him and take over his title and in the meantime marry a virgin from among the many virgins of the Maltese nobility and settle down to see that the line did not die out.

It was as simple as that. It had never entered his head that it might be different. It had never happened before, so why should it happen now?

'Surely, Ermeline, the whole thing is preposterous,' he said. 'John is far too sensible to do anything like that.'

'You must speak to him, Thomas,' said the Countess.

He spread out his hands helplessly. 'Speak to him! Surely that is not necessary. John is sufficiently grown up to know where his duty lies. I consider my speaking to him quite beside the point.'

His wife's suggestion had caught him unawares, and he felt panic. These things were not discussed, because they just did not happen! Besides, he had never come across an experience such as this, and therefore he did not feel himself in a position to tackle it. Generation after generation, his family had married into the nobility. With the help of God, there had never been even the slightest overstepping of the line. Everything had been as it should be. So why, he asked, was he expected to speak to John?

'You must, Thomas, you must,' said the Countess. 'We cannot allow things to go any farther. In fact, they have already gone far enough. We would never be able to live down the disgrace, the . . . scandal. It is unheard of. It is one thing to help these people when they are in need; but it . . . it is nothing short of abnormal when it comes to mating with them.'

Of course, he agreed with her. Like her, he upheld the idea of democracy, of humanitarianism, of philanthropy and of justice, but somewhere a line must be drawn. Blood that had been nurtured and cherished through countless generations,

blood that had been kept pure and unsullied through God knew how many vicissitudes was too sacred a covenant to be broken in one unguarded moment.

He could feel his wife's eyes on his and he knew that in them there was not just an appeal but a cry for help that came distressingly from the very bottom of her heart. He knew that if he failed her now he would be betraying not only himself and his line but the de Balyards, too, a longer and more illustrious line than his.

He felt a pang at the thought of his life of solitude now on the verge of being irrevocably broken.

He sighed and his shoulders hunched.

'Very well, I shall speak to John,' he said. 'Though I still maintain that my speaking to him is beside the point.'

She squeezed his hand. At this, a surge of pleasure flowed through him. He realized that, for the first time since their wedding day, his wife was actually depending on him. For once she was powerless. He looked at her, How helpless she looked, how different!

Within his aged body, he felt again some of the passion of the early days.

CHAPTER VII

Toni lay his head back on the pillow and relaxed. This afternoon, he thought, I'll ask the doctor to move me from this ward or, better still, send me back home. There's nothing wrong with me; I'm sure there ain't . . .

If it had not been for that old fool, Dun Saver, he would be in his shop now, seeing to business, keeping an eye on Lucia, not in this blasted hospital, confined to a bed with nothing to do.

After his collapse in front of Lucia and Dun Saver, and when the sensation of dying had worn off in the middle of the priest's absolution, the first thing he had wanted was wine, a flagon of red wine from his own vat in the basement.

He had sworn then when Dun Saver, clucking over him like an old hen, had turned to Lucia and said urgently: 'The doctor, child. Go for the doctor.'

He had tried to rise to get the wine himself but his legs had given way under him. Then Lucia had gone out, leaving him with the priest.

The pain had subsided a little but when Lucia returned with the doctor, he had had another sharp bout. In the paroxysm, he had scratched the flesh of his belly until blood came.

At the hospital they had examined him and given him an injection.

'Let me get back to my shop,' he had raved at the doctor while they were wheeling him into the ward.

The priest and Lucia had accompanied him to the hospital but after a time he did not see them any more. They must have left; the doctors must have sent them away, for there was nothing else those two could do for him now! He was the doctors' man now, and he had to lie still while they shook their heads and said within his hearing that an operation at that stage might prove dangerous.

'What the hell do they mean by an operation? I ain't going to let anyone cut me up!'

As from a distance, he heard the patter of the nurses' shoes on the linoleum, a cough or two, a fly scouring a window-pane near his head. A depression fell upon him and he knew he was weeping. He thought of the shop, then of Lucia; and when he thought of her he started fidgeting in bed. She was alone now. There was Dun Saver, but what could an old priest do?

He was sorry he had struck her. But she had to be made to see reason . . . to see reason. . . . And now he hadn't the time. This damned pain had removed him from her. But did it matter all that much? When he was losing sight of her . . . could hardly remember her face . . . so soon . . . Only her mother remained. He could see *her*, quite clearly, never so clearly. Her mother he could have touched. . . .

Meanwhile Dun Saver had taken it upon himself to visit Lucia every day. He knew he could depend on her and when she had asked him whether it would be proper to re-open the shop he had instantly suggested that it would.

Two days after her father had been taken to hospital, he asked her if she was still seeing her young man.

'I met him only this morning,' she said, 'as he was going home on leave. I told him about my father.'

'What did he say?'

'He said he was sorry, and . . . and said he would try not to think of him too unkindly.'

Dun Saver laughed. 'This young man of yours,' he said, 'he is a man after my own heart. But, tell me, when is he seeing you again?'

'This evening,' replied Lucia. 'He said he would leave home early and come here.'

'And what do you intend doing?'

She seemed at a loss. 'I don't know. I can't leave the shop . . .'
She stopped. He could see she was troubled.

In a gentle voice he said: 'Are you sorrowing over your father, my child?'

'Yes,' she said simply. 'He is terribly ill, though he won't admit it.' Tears came to her eyes. 'And you know, reverend, how much my father is against my . . . my friendship with

John. Now he is ill, and when I met John this morning I could have wept, I felt so guilty.'

Dun Saver brought his hand down on the table. He had guessed as much. Guilt! Poor child, so many things were arraigned against her!

'You do love the man, do you not?' he asked her.

'I do, oh, I do. I can't live without him!'

'There. So stop thinking that your love is not opportune, just because Toni is ill.'

What an incomparable pearl this child is, he thought.

'Is that not what you think?'

'I . . . I don't know,' she replied.

'Then stop thinking it, Lucia,' he said firmly. 'Whatever your father thinks about this matter, be he sick or hale, does not affect the intentions of the Almighty for one minute. On the other hand, I know your father only too well. Have I not been his friend for so long that I can read him like an open book? It is my impression that the old rascal would like nothing better than to see his daughter take up the position, rightfully as he is bound to see it, in that sphere of society which his wife, your mother, was forced to abdicate. Perhaps it is his perverse way of acting in one way and thinking in another. And who is to blame him?'

Lucia turned surprised eyes on the priest.

'Do you really think so?' she asked.

'I do,' Dun Saver said quietly. He leaned towards her. 'But tell me,' he said, 'you say that your young man wishes to see you this evening.'

'He said so this morning. And I want to see him, too.'

'Then when he comes bring him to the church, after Benediction. I shall be waiting in the sacristy for you, and we can all have a quiet talk together. Eh, what do you say?' And he leaned back again with a satisfied air. His joy was great when he saw the glow in the girl's eyes.

She took his hand in both her own.

'Oh, you are so good to me, reverend,' she exclaimed. 'You make me so unafraid and certain of myself. God is kind to me

through you. You will like John, reverend. I shall bring him to you this evening.'

'So,' Dun Saver cleared his throat. 'I shall do my best to guide you both along the path you have chosen, by the grace of God. And tomorrow I shall visit your father and explain everything to him. I feel certain that he will repeat. If he will not,' he added with a lowering of his eyebrows, 'then I am finished with him for ever.'

Seeing that his vehemence had startled the girl unnecessarily, he smiled and atoned by saying: 'Never mind, Lucia. I shall never have to finish with your father. For all his wildness, I believe he is a little afraid of me. And you see, he loves me as I love him. So do not forget—this evening, after Benediction. God be with you, my daughter, and with your thoughts.'

For Dun Saver, the world seemed to have changed completely. Where there was dark, there was light. He felt a fullness inside him that he had never felt before in his long, uneventful life. And it was not just the love of these two young people that produced this elation in him, he was keenly conscious of God's infinite wisdom in the order of things. He felt strongly and undoubtingly that God had chosen him, from among so many other and much cleverer priests on the Island, to nurture and guide this young love and make of it an instrument of peace between the classes.

God had accorded him this privilege, and he would not fail Him. It was to be the one and crowning glory to a life riddled with failure and disappointment.

However much he tried, he could not regard his great fortune with the equanimity and humility he knew his calling and advanced age demanded of him. Even if he really tried, he could not. . . .

So that when he at last reached the door of his house, he was constrained to stop for breath. While with one hand he held the door-key, with the other he pressed his heart which had suddenly taken to the most extraordinary antics.

CHAPTER VIII

I

The two men were standing and facing each other. The older, short, thick-set, stoop-shouldered and almost completely bald, looked distinctly uncomfortable. He had both hands in his trousers pockets and, though he stood with feet firmly apart on the Persian carpet, yet his over-all stance was clearly that of one who in order to cover his indecision prefers to talk as little as possible.

The Count's decision to speak to John, made in a moment of mental superiority over his wife, had soon wavered, and much as he had wanted then to get the business with his son over and done with, he had welcomed the interval of four days before John could get leave to come home.

When at last John had actually turned up, the Count knew a moment of panic. How was he to go about it without making a fool of himself? How was he, normally a man of few words, set fast in a well-ordered life that had always been devoid of incident, going to convince his son with any measure of success?

His hand shook visibly when he handed his son a drink and poured out one for himself which he left untouched.

Then the whole awful business began. His words came in short, disjointed bursts of allusion to patrimony, honour, duty and so forth. His heart raced madly.

Why couldn't she have done it in the first place? She had always been by far the more practical of the two! And, after all, what business had he with the love-life of his son? It was like stripping his son naked and placing him under a strong light.

He had always looked upon the question of love and sex as sacred and personal, and even though he was perfectly aware that this business involved more than that yet he could not bring himself to put his heart and soul in it. It was no use.

The words came mechanically, meaninglessly from his lips. And never for one moment did his eyes leave the carpet. To look at John would be to precipitate disaster.

He stopped undecided in the middle of a sentence. He was covered in a cold sweat. Mercifully, John spoke. He was more than glad to hear his voice; he sighed with relief.

'I appreciate the points you have made, father. Please don't think that I do not,' John said. He poured another drink from the decanter which he quickly drank.

The Count continued to deflate with relief. Now the matter was all but out of his hands. He would let the boy talk on, explain away this silly tale of Yvette's.

But John did not: in fact he elaborated upon what they had learned from Yvette. The Count listened without surprise or shock. The main thing was that John was talking and not he. He wished he would have nothing more to say while this curious, hateful interview lasted.

And while his son talked, the Count followed with his eyes the curved red line of the carpet to its farthest point and back again to the toes of his house-slippers. It was a relief, that red line; somehow it gathered in his thoughts for him. He thought how poorly he was equipped both as a father and a guardian of the family tradition.

He wished now he had caned John when he was still a mere boy, or, at least, refused consistently to gratify his childish whims. He wished he had been the stern, unbending parent, the type who broke his children's spirits before they had time to grow and forge thoughts, ideals and lives of their own. He wished now he could say something wise and telling.

'It is a question of prestige,' he said twice in succession, and he knew he could not hope to better that statement.

'Prestige!' said John. 'I hope you mean, father, my prestige, my prestige as a man who should exercise free choice, and make his own life.'

The red line seemed to broaden and narrow and zigzag across his vision. Surely, there must be something else he could say before he let go altogether.

'Your mother and I,' he said, 'have been hoping that one day you will marry Charlotte, or . . . or Catherine, let us say, or even Brigida, that is . . .'

He heard John's short, dry laugh.

'Their blood,' his son said, 'has been worked to death, like ours has, father. I want something more wholesome, and pure.'

'Pure!'

'Pure, father.'

Both of them stopped as if with one accord. There was silence. The red line dimmed and he could have sworn it was grey and not red.

He felt John's hand on his shoulder. And heard his voice close to his ear.

'Let me work out my own life, father,' the boy was saying. 'The practice is not as bad as you think—even by the old standards. You have never interfered with my life before, so I cannot see why you should now.'

The Count looked at his son.

'I do not hate her, John,' he said plaintively. 'I swear I do not hate her, whoever she is.'

'I know,' John said. 'If you're still in doubt, remember this—she's wholesome and pure. Purer than money could make her or a long family line.'

'I dread seeing your mother,' the Count said thickly. He looked anxiously at his son. 'Are you quite sure that you have made up your mind?'

'Most emphatically, yes.'

He sighed again and shook himself 'Ah, well,' he said, 'it is in the hands of Providence, I suppose. . . . But I think it is time for dinner. We must not keep your mother waiting. . . .'

2

The Xiberras de Balyards always dined well, and the table was heavily laden.

However, as if to compensate for the richness of the food, conversation was sparse. The Countess, to whom the last four days had been the worst she had ever experienced, had in-

stantly read the outcome on her husband's face when he had come down with John.

Surprisingly, she felt no bitterness against her husband, only pity, such as one would feel for an upstart young mountaineer who broke his neck before he had even set out on his attempt to conquer the heights.

Moved by a perverse sort of kindness, she avoided her husband's eyes all through the dinner, concentrating instead the full force of her personality upon her son.

John was eating well. She made conversation to him. She went out of her way to be pleasant to him; but never for one single moment did she relax her pressure upon him.

She meant to show him, in this silent, forceful way, that with her there would be no compromise; that where he had succeeded with his father, with her he would fail. It was either this woman or everything that he had cherished and known all his life.

Of that she wanted him to be certain. No words were necessary. He would understand. She knew that he did already. No words were necessary. . . .

In everybody's interest, however, she would make one last, cool, calculating move.

CHAPTER IX

When the maid ushered in the Monsignor, the Countess was embroidering a table-cloth for the inmates of the Institute of the Good Samaritan. The Countess had a special affection, not unmixed with pity, for those unfortunate young women who had succumbed in one terrible moment to the lures and temptations of the flesh.

The embroidery she was doing was in the form of a dove representing charity. This dove was seen picking a broken stem of corn from a field of broken stems. She had chosen the design herself as one expressing so clearly the happy lot of those young women now that they were embraced within the healing arms of the Good Samaritan.

She laid aside the silks and the cloth as the Monsignor entered the room.

'My dear,' the Monsignor said, 'I noticed such a degree of urgency in your voice when you phoned that I immediately cancelled another engagement, wrote two short letters, got out the car and drove straight over. I am entirely at your disposal.'

'How very kind of you, Assalon,' she said.

He smiled jovially at her as he sat down. 'Well, Ermeline, what is it all about?'

Monsignor Assalon Xiberras was a large, sanguine type of person. Everything seemed to shine about him: his face, his eyes, his American-style glasses, his very movements. His looks belied his fifty years, and no one, who did not know him, would have guessed him to be the Count's brother.

Quick in speech and movement, he was as unlike his brother as can be imagined.

He had never had any real vocation for the priesthood and could easily have made a success of some other career. However, three factors had helped to make him embrace Holy Orders: his scholastic brilliance, his total lack of desire for women, and a long-standing family tradition by which each generation had produced at least one Monsignor of the Church.

His rise to the Monsignorship was swift and dramatic. The war had caught him at the Vatican, studying Church Diplomacy and he had remained there, a virtual prisoner until it was over.

Those war-years at the Vatican had been fruitful. He had given an excellent impression of himself and when his studies in diplomacy had ended, with the war still on, he had been given work to do in various other branches of the administration of the Universal Church.

This had not only given him good training, but had also brought him in personal contact with some of the more influential members of the Church, so that, when he had at last returned to Malta, he discovered he had been preceded by divers long references and testimonials all bearing on his exceptional qualities. He set foot on the Island to find that his reputation was already largely established.

He was immediately inundated with requests from parish priests, seminarists, and cultural lay societies to preach and lecture. Newspapers and periodicals offered him space. The radio invited him to give a fifteen-minute talk once a week on current affairs. From there to a Monsignorship was a short step. Everyone came to know Monsignor Assalon Xiberras and he came to know many people from all walks of life.

It was therefore natural that the Countess should turn to him with her problem. Besides being a wise man, he was also a very close relative and friend of the family. To such a man she could bare her soul.

The Monsignor sat quite still in his chair while she talked; the only time he moved at all was when he loosened his collar, remarking parenthetically that the days were getting warmer. When she acquainted him with the unsuccessful part that had only that morning been played by her husband, his short, white teeth were momentarily revealed in the manner of a slight grin that seemed to say: What else did you expect from my brother? He has always been so unpractical, though, mind you, one of the best. . .

After the Countess had finished, the Monsignor remained for

a while deep in thought. He looked in fact as if he had fallen asleep.

At last, after a lengthy silence, the Monsignor said: 'I can see John. He is sitting on the wooden bench in the pagoda, staring at the pillars. That is a sign.'

Hopefully she said: 'I do wish you would have a talk with him, Assalon.'

The Monsignor turned to her and said, smiling benevolently: 'In matters such as the one we have before us, my dear sister-in-law, one must skip the inessentials.'

The Countess gasped. 'But surely,' she said, 'it is most essential that you speak to him. With your wisdom . . .'

He held up a ringed hand. 'Hush, Ermeline,' he protested, 'none is wise. Very often hard, careful thinking is mistaken for wisdom. I have been thinking hard and carefully, and I have come to the conclusion that speaking to John is not an essential. One must do only that which is essential. Only so can one hope to reach the final and correct conclusion.'

'Then you do not intend to speak to John?' she asked in a low voice.

'No. And the reasons are these: one, as you have explained to me, he has safely jumped over the hurdle where his father is concerned. I know, I know, my brother is not an extraordinarily difficult hurdle to jump by any means. But you may be surprised, Ermeline, with what trepidation young sons face such a hurdle, even when the father is a weak one, and with what sense of triumph they regard their success. It is my considered opinion that in matters of this kind, mothers and not fathers should take it upon themselves to stand up to their young sons. Initially. . . . Now, of course, the damage has been done. Now he is over this hurdle no one in the whole world will be able, merely by talking, to make him renounce his victory.'

He stopped and glanced again at the pagoda and the young man in it.

'Two,' he said, turning to her again, 'seeing him as he is, now, staring somewhat vacuously at one of the pillars of the

pagoda, reinforces my argument that no direct appeal to him would avail in the least. And three: I know John as I know you and my brother. He has the manners of his father sometimes, but his head is yours, Ermelinde; and I have yet to see anyone succeed in turning you from any of your fixed ideas—the one you have concerning this girl for instance! No, I intend leaving John alone.'

He turned from the window with an air of finality.

The Countess said nothing. Although she tried not to, she bowed her head, overwhelmed by a painful sense of failure. This was the end. She would apologize to her brother-in-law for having called him out on a wild goose chase, and then . . . and then she must prepare to fight this battle alone.

'You have told me that it was Yvette who saw this happening in the first place,' the Monsignor was saying.

'Yes,' she said without raising her head.

'And the maid that was with her is from Valletta.'

'That is so.'

'And she knows this girl.'

'Yes, Assalon, that is how it is.'

She looked up with a puzzled air. He was standing directly before her and there was something in his eyes that immediately gave her renewed hope. But she must be careful. She must not take things for granted until she was perfectly sure.

'Yes, that is how it is,' she repeated.

The Monsignor stood quite still for a while, looking down at her with that same odd expression. Then, in the same tone of voice that had first caught her attention, he said: 'I feel that I have neglected Yvette. I have not seen her for goodness knows how long. It is all this work which is constantly piled on me. How is she keeping?'

'Quite well.'

'I'm glad to hear that. I say, Ermelinde, how about you and me going over to her place this evening? I am sure we shall not be in the way.' He was smiling again. Smiling like that, he was his old, irrepressible self again.

'We shall go if you want to,' she said.

'Of course, it would be ideal if her maid were there, too. I am somewhat curious about her.'

'I do not think that today is her day off.'

'Good.' Briskly, he flicked one sleeve of his soutane with his fingers. 'I shall stay for tea and then we shall both go to Yvette. It is settled, is it not?'

'It is settled.'

She rose and smiled wanly at him.

Then they both turned as they heard John's footsteps.

'Hello, uncle,' said John.

'John!' exclaimed the Monsignor going to him. 'My dear boy, how are you?'

He placed an arm round John's shoulder, and together they left the room, the Countess preceding them.

The Monsignor was in one of his jovial moods and he wanted John to tell him everything about life in the army.

CHAPTER X

Immediately after tea, John got the car out and headed for Valletta. The sky was overcast and a fine drizzle was falling. It laced the windscreen and made the road gleam. It was a kind, quiet, thoughtful sort of rain. He found it pleasant to drive in it: a queer kind of compensation for the way he felt.

It was not doubt that disturbed him; nor was it any secret pang of guilt or feeling of disloyalty towards his family. He was disturbed more than anything else at the intrusion into his idyll of family considerations, practical, down-to-earth matters which tainted whatever they touched.

He swore to himself cursing the circumstances of his birth and position in life. He was only too well aware of the punishment society inflicted on anyone who broke its rules. As in a horrid vision, he saw the cruelty of class, its heartless and inhuman demands, making men insensitive and causing hate to grow like a malignant growth.

He remembered that vague feeling of dread that troubled him, even as he held Lucia in his arms on that glorious afternoon at the Upper Barracca, and the echo it found in her.

He was pale and shaking when he parked the car at Castile Place. He locked the doors and made off straight away, hurrying but unheeding the rain.

He thought of her father ill in hospital and it brought him an unreasonable relief. No need now to stalk down the street like a thief. He increased his pace, vaguely surprised at his own heartlessness but joyful at the thought of seeing her again.

She was waiting for him in the shelter of her own doorway. The shop was closed but he hardly noticed. He had eyes only for her. His heart raced furiously.

They greeted each other in silence, taking each other's hands. But, as if they were both conscious of the tension in each other's heart, they relaxed their hold.

Lucia said: 'My Father Confessor says he wishes to meet you.'

'I'm glad,' he said simply.

'He is waiting for us at the Church. Shall we go?'

While they walked, he was conscious of people's eyes on them, from doorsteps, from behind triangles of curtain in windows and balconies. He felt strangely exhilarated at this. He wanted people to stare, and say among themselves: There they go. He wished his mother could see him then, and all his relatives and all his friends. . . .

He would say: Here's the woman I love. Here's the woman I'm going to marry. Any objections?

Then he would look upon their faces, and see their expressions: some stupefied, others sad, others openly hostile and others just uncomprehending. And then his ancestors would appear, the whole illustrious, mouldy procession. And he would say to the ghosts: Here, you old collection of rags and bones, look on this woman by my side. She lives, she's more alive than you ever were. That's right, go on, ogle her. But I don't blame you; what were your women after all but anaemic, jaded whores!

The Church was in thick shadows and, but for them, completely empty.

'Dun Saver said he would come for us,' said Lucia in a low voice. 'Soon he will call us.'

They knelt together before the marble altar. The marble gleamed opaquely in grey contours. The gloom was a restful cocoon, made cosier by the sound of the rain.

He glanced at her while they knelt. Her head under the veil of black lace leaned reverently forward. His elbow just touched hers and a thrill broke into his prayers. 'O God,' he prayed, 'O God, I love her so much. Let me be worthy of her, worthy of her soul as of her flesh. Do not be jealous, God, of my love for her. For as I adore you, I adore her, too. Let not that draw your anger.'

Suddenly, in a far corner of the church, just below the oaken pulpit, appeared Dun Saver. They saw him, and it was as if he had always been there. . . .

Dun Saver stood for a while surveying the couple in silence,

a half-awakened smile of greeting on his lips. Then, without a word, he led them into the sacristy and to a small, curtained alcove. It contained a massive, brown-painted wardrobe, a *pré-dieu*, four ordinary chairs with raffia seats and a Crucifix on the wall.

They sat.

Dun Saver was having the time of his life. Even a blind man could see that these two were indeed truly and magnificently in love. And he would bless this love and nourish it as he would a beautiful and tender plant. It would blossom out and flower into many colours of the purest hue. And the fragrance of this flower would permeate the divisions of society, bringing a peace amongst them and a nearness to God. And all through him! God was good!

'I hope you will do me the great privilege of allowing me to celebrate your nuptial mass,' he said.

'It would be a great pleasure, Father,' said the boy. He liked the way the boy said that, unhesitatingly, warmly, quite warmly.

He said: 'As perhaps Lucia has already told you, we have been having a little difficulty with her father. However, I can assure you that he will come round in time. He's an old friend of mine, and will listen to me.'

The more he looked at this boy the more he liked him. He was a good judge of people; this boy was honest, he was good.

Completely relaxed, he asked: 'And how about your family?'

He saw the boy stiffen. That rather surprised him. Then he realized that he had hardly given any consideration to that side of the question. He had allowed the over-all picture—an attractive picture, it must be admitted—to blind him in respect of certain details. And this question of the young man's family was an important detail when all was said and done. He must be more careful in future.

He cleared his throat and leaned forward in his chair. 'Perhaps you have already made your intentions known to the Count and Countess,' he said.

'I have, said John slowly.

'And how do they regard the matter?'

The boy did not reply at once. When he spoke, however, it was in a firm voice. Dun Saver instantly thanked God for that.

'I am a grown man,' the boy said. 'And I cannot see why a man of my age should have to rely on the opinions of his mother and father where his future happiness is concerned, however great his regard for them.'

He was not completely satisfied with that reply, however much he appreciated the boy's firmness and lack of equivocation. He had expected something more final, more telling. He decided to probe further.

'Of course,' he said, 'I am fully conscious of the fact that certain . . . er . . . difficulties may arise especially where there exists a divergence in attitude towards life in general.'

'I admit there may be difficulties,' the boy said at once. 'But I love Lucia too well to let them stand in my way.'

Definitely a man of character, he thought. However, he was still a little doubtful. Obviously the boy knew more than he chose to say. Things were getting a bit out of hand, he mused, and he wondered whether he would have strength or wisdom enough to keep them in their proper perspective.

Then inspiration struck Dun Saver.

Let us suppose, he thought to himself, that his parents do object to Lucia. He would most certainly not give the girl up. He is not that type. He has the courage of his convictions. If he marries her, his family may never forgive him. But against that is the fact that the union will help just the same towards the gradual closing of the rift between the classes. The Labour papers will welcome it, as will the Conservative ones; both movements contain a number of worthy citizens who, as true Christians, look askance at class-strife. Well, seen from this angle, this love and the sacred union that is destined to follow it can do a lot of good, even without the consent of the de Balyards.

He smiled and took John's hand. 'My dear boy,' he said, 'I am more than pleased that I have met you.' Then he looked

from him to Lucia and back to him again. 'You are both exceedingly fortunate in each other. I wish you to understand that I am always ready to give you all the help I can.'

'They rose and shook hands:

'God be with you, my children,' he said softly. 'And may He prosper you both in your love and shower His blessings on you.'

He saw them out of the church. It was still raining, so that John and Lucia had to run across the street to reach the comparative shelter of the opposite pavement. They laughed as they ran, like children. Then they stopped for a moment, turned and waved to Dun Saver. He waved back to them.

Then he saw them setting off at a running pace again until the street-corner hid them from view.

He re-entered the church to wait for the rain to subside a little before going home. Their laughter still in his ears made him feel like weeping. And, because he was too old to hold them back, the tears came, smarting his eyes. He liked weeping in church when he was alone, but he had never before wept to share other people's laughter.

So he wept, this old, old priest, even as he prayed. He felt so thankful. Thankful above all that the Countess was a charitable woman, a woman given to good works, an exemplary mother. She would be the last person he felt sure to persist in depriving her children of their right to happiness and fulfilment. It was most fortunate for his beloved children that the Countess was such a woman. . . .

The rain lasted longer than he had anticipated. When he arrived home he was wet through.

It was after he had changed and drunk a cup of steaming coffee laced with orange-water that his sister handed him a letter. Sa Matress explained to her brother that the letter had been brought to the house by a girl barely ten minutes ago.

The envelope was of pale blue and it was sealed. Inside was a note, of the same colour as the envelope, written in a large, flowery hand.

CHAPTER XI

I

Marjann was tiny but well formed, barely seventeen and going out with a young man for the first time in her life.

She adored her mistress and thought the world of little Louise. She was a good maid and kept her mistress's house as clean as a new pin which earned her at least one remark of approbation a day sometimes from the mistress and sometimes from the master. Now she was washing up and indulging in thoughts of her Salvinu that were nothing short of heavenly.

When her mistress entered the kitchen and informed her that the Monsignor wished to speak to her, Marjann's gay mood vanished completely and she felt cold all over. Panic seized her. She did not know what to do; she wished the floor would open up and swallow her.

Her mother's words of warning came to her: she was still too young to go about with boys; one day she would land herself in trouble!

It seemed to her that this was the beginning. For what would a priest, and a Monsignor at that, want with her except to reprimand her on the licentious life she was leading?

Her mistress almost had to force her to go in to the Monsignor. When at last she did, she crept into the room looking more dead than alive.

The Monsignor, however, was gentleness itself; he did not even mention Salvinu and Marjann soon forgot her fears and was much taken to him. In no time at all she was chatting to him as if she had known him all her life.

When he mentioned Lucia and asked her whether she knew the girl well, her confidence in herself increased by leaps and bounds.

Naturally, she had absolutely nothing against Lucia. Lucia was a quiet, hard-working girl and had never done her any harm; in fact they were almost friends. But for Lucia to go

about like that with Master John, who was not only a gentleman but the son of a Count, well, that was taking things a little too far. Lucia should have realized at once how foolishly she was behaving.

Marjann wondered what the Monsignor, and the Countess, thought about it. Of course, they were not going to tell her. And that's how it should be after all. So she controlled her curiosity and concentrated on giving the right answers to the questions the Monsignor put to her.

No, she had never seen them together again after that afternoon at the Barracca. Yes, Monsignor, she knew Lucia's Father Confessor. He was the same one she went to herself.

'Oh yes, he's a nice, old priest, and the penances he gives are not unreasonable.'

2

At about the same time that Marjann was having her pleasant chat with the Monsignor and the Countess at her mistress's house, John and Lucia were sitting at a table at the Queen's Café, barely a hundred yards away.

After leaving Dun Saver, they had walked and run through the rain to Hastings Gardens. They had looked about them for a dry place to sit and found none. They stood for a while under a large tree, their arms about each other, laughing at the rain that fell on them from the laden branches. Their hearts were full of happiness.

The old priest's enthusiasm over their love seemed a source of new strength to them. It was as if something indescribably holy and wise had been added to the deep love they felt for each other. It was an experience they wanted to keep for ever. Dun Saver was an angel! . . .

However, the rain continued to fall, and soon they wanted to escape from it. They walked out of the Gardens and made for the café.

He helped her remove her raincoat and then ordered café espresso and cheesecakes. The coffee was hot and they lingered over it.

They sat in an inner room. It was deserted apart from another young couple. A cat, a refugee from the rain, walked up quietly to them and rubbed its wet side against the bottom of John's trousers.

'How sweet,' Lucia said when John picked it up. 'Let me hold it, please.'

He protested. 'It's all wet,' he said.

'Please,' she said.

He handed the cat to her, and she held it gently in both hands and purred to it. The cat protested mildly at first, then it lay still, regarding Lucia with placid, green eyes.

'You know, that cat's making me jealous,' said John in mock-seriousness.

He held out his hand and took the cat from her.

'Now, snoo,' he said to the cat. 'Off you go.' And he turned to Lucia with a smile.

She sat staring in front of her. The smile had left her face.

'I know what you are thinking,' said John softly, 'for I am thinking the same—and it's a wonderful thought, this happiness. Even the rain is a joy.'

He bent his head and kissed her hand. Its slight quiver caressed his lips.

'Kiss me, John,' she said. His lips touched hers, and it set his heart on fire, and the smell of her was of flowers laden with the rain. He wanted time to stop still, slamming the flood-gates of the future and walling up the groping shadows of the past. Her kiss and the fresh smell of her were a consummation of all that had gone before: the priest's blessing; the cat in her hands; even this silent, fairy day of rain.

When they left the café, the rain was a blessing again. It had not, after all, lost its power to make them laugh. They laughed as they ran across the soaked square, holding hands, and through streets of people crouched in doorways, through puddles of neon-rainbow, under the high, ancient walls of the city.

They stopped on the pavement outside Lucia's house, gasping, with the running and the laughter.

He placed his hands on her face, and his fingers traced the line of her eyes, cheeks and mouth.

'My beautiful, beautiful one,' he murmured huskily through the inch of rain that separated them.

He did not kiss her, so strong was his certainty of her kiss that was to come. He felt her arms go round him, forcing him to her and his lips to her lips that were suddenly alive and insistent.

When he reached Castile place, where his car was parked the rain stopped abruptly. He was conscious of the deep silence more than he had been of the tumult of the rain. It was like the flapping of wings ceasing abruptly or music finishing suddenly on a high note, so that it seemed an end and yet was in the nature of an interlude.

CHAPTER XII

The furniture in the waiting-room consisted of two high-backed, leather chairs, a thick oak table and a Crucifix hanging above an old print of Caravaggio's, 'The Beheading of St John.'

Dun Saver sat on one of the chairs, conscious of the draught swirling around his ankles from the hall doorway which the house-keeper had left open. He sat awkwardly, keenly aware of the mothball newness of his soutane. This soutane he wore only once a year, that is on the Feast of St Paul Shipwreck, and on occasions such as this one, an extremely rare event.

His sister had fussed a great deal over his toilet and just before leaving the house, as she was brushing his hat—quite unnecessary, he had thought irritably, as goodness knew how long it had been stored away in the wardrobe—she had noticed a button missing on his cassock.

'It does not matter, Matress,' he had protested, anxiously looking at the clock. 'Surely one missing button does not make any difference when there are over two dozen of them still sticking dutifully to their place!'

But she would not listen. She hurried arthritically to her work-basket, and presently descended upon him again with a needle, an enormous length of black cotton, and a black button.

'I want to make certain that you attend on the Monsignor in a presentable fashion,' she had admonished him. 'And to keep still, Saver; I cannot work while you fidget so!'

He escaped from her at last and left the house, bathed in perspiration and wishing he had never told her of the Monsignor's summons.

He had been waiting now for over half an hour and still there was no sign that his presence was required.

He admitted over and over again to himself that he was considerably baffled. He had slept badly that night thinking over the Monsignor's note.

What did the Monsignor want with him? The blue note had expressed nothing except that the Monsignor requested the

pleasure of meeting him this morning and at this hour. Although he had spent the best part of his life as a priest, Dun Saver had always looked upon the rank of Monsignor and above with a mixture of awe and trepidation.

Naturally it was sheer presumption to suppose, even for one moment, that the Monsignor might have called him to offer him a Canonry . . .

'I must not think in this fashion,' he said to himself. 'I am too old now for such an honour.'

As the minutes passed, he became more and more nervous and irritable with himself. He tried to concentrate on the 'Beheading' but the picture only filled him with disgust.

'The Monsignor will see you now, *sinjur*,' came the house-keeper's clipped tones.

He rose immediately and took his hat which he had placed on the table.

'I will see to the hat, *sinjur*,' the woman said and took the hat from his hands. She crossed the room and hung it on a bracket beside the Caravaggio. He could not help feeling the element of a reprimand in her action. . . .

He followed the woman through the hall, past a huge, potted aspidistra, and along a short, bare corridor under the stairs. She stopped just outside a door beside which was another potted plant, and knocked perfunctorily.

'Enter,' said a voice inside the room.

She turned the knob and pushed the door open; then stepped aside to allow him to enter the room. The door was closed behind him.

Dun Saver's first impression was that he had stepped right into another house altogether: the room was so entirely different. It was vast: the floor was completely carpeted; the walls were covered with red damask. A chandelier of tinkling crystal hung from the centre of the ceiling. On the opposite wall was a large tapestry depicting the most exotic animals and half-naked hunters and huntresses. Below the tapestry stood the desk.

The room was in semi-darkness, even though its one window

was long and reasonably wide. The sky outside was overcast and the high wall of the house next door obstructed most of what light there was.

The Monsignor was writing at the desk. All of him was in shadow except his hands and chest which fell within the lighted orbit of the swivel lamp on the desk.

Dun Saver remained standing, a little bewildered, a little lost.

At last, the Monsignor finished writing, pushed his pen away and rose from his chair with a noisy agility that startled Dun Saver.

The Monsignor came towards him, hands outstretched.

'Do please forgive me, reverend, for keeping you so long,' he said taking Dun Saver's hand and shaking it. 'Pray sit down.' He pulled a chair from a corner and placed it in front of the desk. 'Pray sit down,' he said again.

'Thank you, Monsignor,' said Dun Saver. He sat down. All the carefully prepared speeches of greeting had escaped him. He sat right on the edge of the chair, wishing he had not let the woman take his hat away from him. His hands wanted desperately to hold on to something. Slowly his fingers crept to the edge of the desk behind the ornate pen-stand, and he felt better.

The Monsignor had taken his seat again. From his chair he looked at the old priest, and there was a slow, soft smile on his face. His glasses glinted in the half-gloom.

'I remember you,' he said at last.

'Remember me, Monsignor?' Dun Saver repeated in a surprised tone.

'I remember you when I was still a Seminarist. You used to come to the Seminary now and then and say Holy Mass for us. Do you not remember?'

'Yes, I do remember now,' Dun Saver said. 'It was at a time when I was *locum tenens* to the resident Chaplain. So long ago.'

'How time flies!' said the Monsignor. He looked up at the ceiling and heaved a sigh. 'How time flies! One moment you are young, the next, well, what are you.'

'Old, Monsignor,' said Dun Saver.

'Exactly. But one must not be unduly pessimistic. For old age is in the order of things, a segment, an all-important segment in the round of God's infinite mind. It is a thought that consoles me.'

'Indeed it consoles me, too,' said Dun Saver, 'very often. But, forgive me if I sound presumptuous, but why should your reverence talk of old age? Your reverence is still in the prime of life and enjoying . . .'

'Tut-tut!' interposed the Monsignor. 'The prime of life I consider to be that age which approximates yours, let us say. Then truly is life at its prime, for like the ripe fruit, it is mellowed by the sun of experience and caressed by the exquisite breeze of wisdom.'

Dun Saver felt himself flushing. Never had he been spoken to like this! Never before in his whole life had he heard anyone laying such an original significance on his years. He felt very flattered. 'That is a wise construction of yours, Monsignor, permit me to say,' he said.

'And it is a true one,' rejoined the Monsignor. 'The wisdom that only years can bring is like a priceless diadem, for it enables one to see all matters in their true light. That is why it is to be so greatly envied in those who possess it. The young are so fragile, so insignificant, in the light of such wisdom.'

Dun Saver fidgeted in his chair.

'I begin to apprehend the meaning of all that you are saying, Monsignor,' he said. 'Though far be it from me to apply what you have just said to myself.'

'Whom else?' asked the Monsignor abruptly. He leant over with his elbows on the desk. 'Allow me to point out that you are one of the privileged few whom God has graced with the years of wisdom. And I address myself to you as one who is younger in years and therefore requires often to turn to the fount from which such wisdom emanates.'

Dun Saver had a quick flash of inspiration; he said in astonishment: 'You have not asked me to come here, Monsignor, to seek my advice?'

'Precisely,' replied the Monsignor at once. 'That is the case.'

'But . . .'

'I am turning to you in a moment of great difficulty and doubt.'

Dun Saver looked at the Monsignor as if he had suddenly remembered a favourite psalm he had long forgotten. A muscle in his face twitched and his fingers scratched the wood behind the pen-stand.

'If . . . if I can be of any help . . .' he stammered.

The Monsignor rose from his chair, and put his hands behind his back.

'It is like this,' he said. 'It is a matter of love. Not divine love, but human love, love between a man and a woman.'

He paused, and Dun Saver, thinking that he was perhaps required to say something, said: 'Yes?'

'Let us say, a man loves a woman, and the feeling is reciprocated. It is perfectly natural, and in the eyes of God, it is as it should be—so far. However, other considerations suddenly arise. The parents of the young swain, let us suppose, entertain certain objections to such an alliance which in the long run might lead to holy wedlock.'

'And are the objections valid, Monsignor?' Dun Saver interposed to ask. He would never have imagined that one day he would be sitting alone with a Monsignor and talking in this intimate fashion, just as if they were equals! He still felt a little dazed by it all.

'Ah, the objections,' said the Monsignor. 'Let us say that they are perfectly valid. Are you following me?'

'Indeed I am.'

'Well,' continued the Monsignor, stopping in front of Dun Saver. 'What would your judgment be in such a case? Should the alliance be encouraged or should not everything possible be done to terminate it at once?'

I am slightly out of my depth here, thought Dun Saver, but no matter, I shall concentrate.

He pursed his brow and thought for a while.

'Monsignor,' he said at last, 'about the parents' objections . . .

'They have nothing against the girl—as such.'

'Oh.' He thought again, then: 'May I be forgiven if I ask you to explain what these objections might be?'

'Certainly.' The Monsignor pulled a hand slowly across his chin. 'Let us conjecture,' he said, 'that the parents' objections are based on what they consider to be the inalienable fact that if this alliance were to proceed, great and irreparable harm might be incurred by everybody concerned—by the young swain, by his parents and, last but not least, by the girl.'

'In other words,' said Dun Saver with another flash of inspiration, 'in other words, the happiness of this couple is intimately connected with whether or not the young man's parents object to the union.'

'You have put it admirably, Dun Saver.' The old priest started. It was the first time the Monsignor had called him by his name. Pleasure surged through him. He felt he would never forget this great privilege, this honour, as long as he lived.

'And you have stated, Monsignor,' he said, 'that the parents' objections are legitimate.'

'Legitimate and valid.' The Monsignor paused for a second, and then added: 'Well, my friend, in such a delicate case, what do you suggest the true course should be? That the young couple should continue to plunge headlong on to the rocks of shipwreck without anyone trying to avert such a catastrophe, or that they should be made to realize the danger as soon as possible? I appreciate fully the dreadful pangs that would attend the separation of their hearts, but would you not rather have it like this, when there is still time for injured feelings to heal? As I see it, any other course would signify irreparable disaster. . . . Tell me, Dun Saver, what do you think? So much depends on your answer!'

While the Monsignor had been speaking, Dun Saver had had a succession of inspired thoughts. These, however, were of a totally different nature from the ones that had come to him earlier in the interview. They had taken him unawares, for he

had least expected them. In the last minute or so, Dun Saver discovered that he had learnt many things.

'Well, Dun Saver,' the Monsignor was saying, 'have you arrived at a verdict?'

The old priest raised his eyes slowly to the Monsignor. He could only dimly see the prelate, for his eyes were full of tears.

'It . . . it is about Lucia and John that you are speaking, Monsignor?' he said.

He rose from his seat and groped for the back of the chair support. A great tiredness was in his legs, so that if the Monsignor had not caught his arm he would have fallen.

'Thank you, Monsignor,' he said. With an effort he straightened himself and looked at the Monsignor. The prelate was not smiling any more. There was hardly any expression on his face.

'There are many occasions,' Dun Saver said, 'when even the wisdom of old age, as your reverence has put it, falls far short. Quite often old age becomes another name for blindness. Forgive me for not being able to achieve that high standard of wisdom which you set for me a moment ago and for which I shall remain for ever grateful.' He gazed about him helplessly. 'For a moment I had forgotten that John is your nephew, and that there are certain considerations which apply equally to him as to you and, of course, to your brother, the Count and to her ladyship, the Countess.'

He felt he would never be able to move another step, so weak did he feel. He must have time. Given time he might be able to manage a polite farewell to the prelate and the walk home. There he could rest.

'I await your instructions, Monsignor,' he said.

The Monsignor seemed to come to life again. He placed an arm round the old priest's shoulders and walked with him across the room. Dun Saver was glad for the support the prelate's arm gave him.

'My instructions are simple, my friend,' said the Monsignor with just a touch of sadness in his voice. 'I lay the greatest

store on your wisdom and love of justice. And justice lies on the side of my family's objections to this alliance. Need I elaborate? I am aware that you are in a position of great intimacy with this girl. I therefore expect you to make the best possible use of that position to the satisfaction of myself, your prelate, but, above all, in the light of certain moral and social tenets we need not go into now.'

When he reached the waiting-room, Dun Saver found that the woman had moved his hat again. At last, he found it lying on a chair in a far corner of the room. It was as if the woman had discovered that the hat hanging on the wall-bracket offended her taste.

He took the hat and walked to the door. There was no sign of the woman. The house was silent. He opened the heavy door and closed it carefully behind him.

When he arrived at the door of his own house, he realized that he had forgotten to put on his hat.

It lay in his hands, and there were deep dents on the rim where his fingers had pressed.

CHAPTER XIII

I

When the doctors broke the news to Toni that he had a tumour in the stomach and infection in the kidneys, he passed his hand rapidly over his eyes as if he had just awakened and said: 'I knew there was something wrong with me.'

That afternoon, they brought and placed in the vacant bed next to Toni's, a boy of nineteen with a wild shock of fair hair, pinched cheeks and a smile; he kept eyeing the nurses, especially the one with the large bosom.

Next morning, when Lucia came, Toni shared the contents of the basket with this new boy.

But he refused the fruit and the biscuits and made eyes at Lucia. Toni laughed.

'He is a one, this one,' he said to his daughter. 'Don't take any notice of him, Lucia; he'll end up with the fat nurse and then he'll see.' And he laughed again.

He asked Lucia many questions about the house and the shop. He had never seen her so beautiful. It must be that man of hers, the son of the hoity-toity ones, damn them!

He sighed and put the fruit and the biscuits away. When Lucia was gone, he would give them to the nurse for the boy.

Then he told her. Immediately after, he was sorry he had. He couldn't bear the sight of her crying.

'It's nothing, I tell you,' he told her. 'I'll be up and doing in no time at all. Stop that, will you?'

She smiled at him. That's my girl! He was reassured. He could rely on her. Like mother, like daughter. A woman you could rely on.

O God!

'So you haven't given him up yet,' he said. He was just reproachful. He felt he couldn't now be otherwise but just reproachful. Hospital had done things to him.

Looking at her, it was clear to him now he hated her man

no more. That's how it was. Simple! But he still didn't like it! There was something damn' wrong somewhere. . . ,

'Dun Saver said it is right, father, and that you will come to see it that way, too, in time,' the child was saying. 'And if Dun Saver says it is right, it must be right.'

Oh, yes, come to think of it, how else could it be? If Dun Saver says it is. . . .

Hell!

He rose on one elbow because he felt the first twinges.

'Take care of yourself, Lucia,' he said. 'That's all I ask of you: take care of yourself.' The sweat poured into his eyes, so that she swam in his vision.

Surprisingly he pushed the bell-switch.

'Go now,' he said. 'I feel I want to rest. Don't worry about me. I'll be as fit as a fiddle, you mark my words. Go now.'

She kissed him.

'I shall come again tomorrow,' she said.

'Go now.'

'Bye, Lucia,' said the boy, winking at her.

'Bye,' She smiled at him. She passed the ward nurse as she left.

2

Once outside the hospital building, Lucia walked over to the low boundary wall and looked down at Msida Creek below her. The sun gleamed hard on the blue water. Across the Creek, Msida Church, with its tall, twin spires and long-angled façade, seemed to float in the sea-dazzle. In front of it, in the tree-lined playground, the children looked like colourful ants and their laughter and shrieks reached right up to where she stood. She stayed there looking down for quite a time. . . .

Afternoon was a slow passing away of time before she could meet John. It crept along on thoughts that were as heartlifting as the sight of the Creek in the sun: her father looking better and eager for the operation that would set him right again, the boy with the merry eyes, John at the end of the day. Thoughts that could transform the beginning and the end of each day. . . .

She walked slowly out of the hospital grounds, down the steep hill that led to the Creek.

On the way she stopped at a café and, having plenty of time on her hands, ordered a lime drink. She wondered what John was doing. Yesterday he had told her that they had to go on shooting practice on the cliffs at Mellicha. She wondered if he was back. Anyhow, he would not be free till six that evening. She paid and left the shop.

Down at the playground, she sat on a bench and watched the children.

When I have children, that's how I want them to be—brown and healthy, and not minding the afternoon sun, even if I do. My son will be like John, in everything. I'll be proud of him and he'll be dear to me. He'll be like John.

How dangerous can an operation be? Tumour in the stomach—what exactly was a tumour? She must ask John. The doctors were well trained nowadays. . . . Nothing could go wrong surely! She was surprised to find she had very little experience of illness. Apart from an occasional cold, she had never been ill. And her father, too. Except lately.

She caught a bus for Valletta.

At Castile Place she walked off from the bus terminus with a light step.

Near the Savoy Theatre, she noticed a woman stopping and turning to look at her. She glanced back curiously. She had never seen this woman before and was not a little surprised to see her walk towards her.

'I know you, my dear,' said the woman. 'Even though you don't know me.' She wondered how old this woman was; her made-up face told one age, her eyes another.

'So you're all alone now.' The woman smiled, revealing large, uneven teeth. She brought herself closer and Lucia could smell her perfume and her sweat.

'Why don't you come and see me? How about tomorrow, eh?' the woman said. 'You need money. I can help you earn some. I've helped girls like you before. I'll give you this card. That's my address.'

She was hardly aware that she had taken the card from the woman. It lay between her fingers and she did not attempt to read what was on it.

'Don't forget,' said the woman. 'I can help you earn some lovely dough.' Then she was gone

Lucia stood there an instant then hurriedly dropped the card and walked quickly away. Her heart was beating fast, and the pavement was a crazy sort of foothold. The corner of the street seemed an appallingly long way off. She concentrated on reaching it before she started to think properly. Until then she was safe, for in order to think she would have to forget the white teeth, and the woman's eyes and her perfume and her sweat. And she was not likely to be able to do that in a hurry. . . .

She reached the corner. From here it looked perfectly easy. Down the long, steep street and into her own.

Numb or not, she did not fail to see Marjann. Marjann was on the other pavement, walking leisurely along. She never felt so thankful; here was a face she knew. She turned to Marjann and smiled, preparing to cross the street to speak to the girl. But there was no response from Marjann; after a quick glance at Lucia, she hastened her step and, in an instant, was gone.

Lucia stood where she had stopped, feeling a strange tauntness inside her, although her body felt limp and her mind dazed. Then suddenly the sensation passed and she could think clearly.

Marjann's obvious move coming so quickly on top of her meeting with that woman was a shock that sobered her. When she started walking again all her sprightliness was gone. Instinctively she knew that her life had, in the short space of ten minutes, suffered a change. How and why she could not understand clearly. But there it was—the end of a chapter, whatever that meant!

So that when she neared her own house and found Sa Matress waiting for her, she was not surprised: she had almost expected something like this. Perhaps if Sa Matress had not

been there, she would have found it more difficult to understand this sudden change, all started by the whore.

Sa Matress, small, spent and irritable, surveyed her coldly. 'I have been waiting for you for nearly an hour,' the woman said. 'My brother has asked for you. "Go to Lucia," he said, "and tell her that I wish to speak to her at once. At once, do you hear?" That is why I am here.'

'I shall come,' Lucia said, 'if Dun Saver wants me.'

She felt unconcerned now. She did not even ask herself what Dun Saver might want with her. As they walked away, she could sense the hatred of the older woman.

Neither of them spoke another word.

CHAPTER XIV

I

Dun Saver was waiting for them. Even before Sa Matress could turn the key in the lock, he had opened the door, and without a word, motioned both of them in. Sa Matress stood aside to let Lucia enter first and then closed the door herself.

The hall was narrow and so dark that Lucia could hardly see. Not a word had been spoken by any of them. Lucia had a feeling that none was necessary. If anything was at all eloquent, it was the sight of Dun Saver himself framed in the doorway a moment ago, full in the yellow light of the street; then the vision was plunged into the deep dark of the hall.

But in that short time, Lucia had a complete picture of the change. It was as if the Dun Saver she had known had been spirited away and a scarcely recognizable image left in his place. She shuddered, for the image suddenly, inexplicably, reminded her of death. So that when he touched her arm in the dark to lead her from the hall, she knew a moment of fear.

Up a short flight of stairs, then Dun Saver stopped outside a door and opened it.

'Come in, Lucia,' he said.

His voice meant nothing to her. The tone, however, was that of a person who had only just stopped weeping. But surely, she thought, Dun Saver does not weep; he is too old to weep. She had never known a priest to weep. . . .

She entered the room. It was low-ceilinged and badly lighted. In the centre stood a table, its surface rough and stained with ink. It was littered with papers, two or three books and a number of pens and pencils.

The walls were entirely bare except for a huge, metal Crucifix on which hung Christ bespattered with red. That red was the only touch of colour in the room.

Most of Dun Saver's books lay on shelves let directly into

the wall. The books were few but all large and with torn or curled edges. They gave her the impression of irresolute fingers turning and turning the pages with no real purpose and with an utter lack of concentration.

In a corner stood a *prie-dieu* with hard wood for the knees. The place had the dimensions of an ordinary kitchen but nothing of its warmth.

She felt she had entered a place from which it was difficult to escape. It was just a half-conscious surmise, a doubt, but it gave her a dry constriction in her throat.

When at last she sat down on the chair the priest brought her, she did so with thankfulness. Her eyes were half-closed; she swore silently to herself that as long as she remained in that room she would not look at Dun Saver. With a queer sense of unreality, she felt that by so doing no power on earth could keep her imprisoned here. Some time she would be free again—free to go as she pleased; free to meet John that evening.

However, she must not look at Dun Saver's face. It was a face she did not know.

As if he had been struck by similar thoughts, Dun Saver stood with his back to her, before the red Crucifix. She could not say whether he was praying or just playing for time. He stood there a long time.

When at last he turned slowly to her, she hastily lowered her eyes to her lap and waited.

He spoke in a low, hoarse whisper.

'Lucia, my daughter,' he began, 'the matter I have called you here for is of such importance that it can only be dealt with in consonance with the law of the confessional. . . . Kneel at the *prie-dieu*. I must confess you.'

2

The instant he had made the sign of the Cross over her he would not allow her to speak, but spoke himself—suddenly, breathlessly, as if he were determined not to allow the will and the time to escape him.

'Lucia,' he said, 'you must stop seeing this young man.'

Involuntarily, she raised startled eyes to him, surprised and questioning.

'Remember,' he added hastily, 'remember that at this moment we are both bound by the seal of the confessional. You must consider what advice I may give you as binding in the eyes of the Lord.'

'Father,' she said, 'I don't understand. Not see John again?'

She was now looking directly at him, at his eyes that lacked all light except for the thin, pointed spark in them. That spark was dull and grey and it looked as if it had come up from somewhere deep inside him. A man has that spark in his eyes only once in a lifetime; and when it has come and gone it never appears again. It is as precious as the soul, and once it is wasted, there is nothing else. . . .

She looked straight at that spark now. The hesitancy of a moment ago was gone and she knew that by fixing her eyes on that tiny spark she could hope for deliverance.

'You must not see him again,' he said. 'Do you not understand? If you see him again, you will be committing nothing less than a mortal sin. A mortal sin, Lucia!'

She trembled and felt weak, but never for one moment did her eyes leave his. The spark still burned, dully and insistently.

'But you yourself . . .' she began.

He made a nervous gesture with his hand.

'That is all finished,' he said. 'Whatever I may have said once has no meaning now. I was in the wrong, Lucia. God alone knows how wrong I was. . . . But now you must swear before God that you will never see this man again. I order you as your Confessor, Lucia; swear to me and to God.'

She had no idea what gave her the strength. Perhaps it was that the spark had suddenly vanished from his eyes and this was the signal for her to rise to her feet.

'I cannot do what you ask me!' she cried.

He rose, too, and stretched a hand as if to hold her. But she did not stop to think what he had really wanted to do—grip her or steady himself. She walked to the door and flung it open.

'I cannot do what you ask me,' she cried again.

The stairs were shifting and swaying dizzily before her eyes, so that she almost fell going down them. Sa Matress stood suddenly before her, but she pushed the old woman aside. She must escape.

She made for the front door. The latch was tight but despair gave her strength.

She could hear him calling her from the top of the stairs.

'Come back,' he was saying. 'Come back, Lucia. It is a Confession. You do not know what you are doing! Bring her back, Matress.'

At last she had the door open and she rushed out into the street. She did not know where she was going and she did not care. She must get away from the madness in his eyes. Even without God's help, she must get away from that!

In the house she had just left, Dun Saver leaned heavily against the banisters. Below, with her back to him, stood Sa Matress staring with hatred in her eyes and contracted lips at the open door.

'Why did you not stop her, Matress?' cried Dun Saver hoarsely. 'She is gone and I have lost her. Now I can do nothing, nothing. I have lost her.'

Then, in his weakness, he sat on the stairs and wept.

CHAPTER XV

The Monsignor, smelling discreetly of eau-de-cologne and freshly laundered clothes, was coming to the end of a pleasant chat with his sister-in-law.

'That is the position then,' he said, rising from his chair, 'and I entertain great hopes that the whole unfortunate business will be soon terminated.'

The Countess's eyes sparkled but she still appeared somewhat doubtful.

'What if this girl does not follow the advice of her Father Confessor?' she said.

The Monsignor gave an indulgent chuckle.

'You need have no worry on that score, Ermeline,' he said, patting her hand. 'It is a matter of confidence. It is almost impossible for a girl to disregard the counsels of a man with whom she has consistently shared her innermost thoughts, her hopes and her sorrows since early childhood. You see, a girl like that grows with the years to believe implicitly in her spiritual director.' And I hope he told her in Confession, he thought; a point I forgot to make explicitly clear . . .

'But I must go now,' he said aloud. 'I am giving a lecture to engaged couples this evening and I have to prepare my notes.'

The Countess rose. She held out a hand. 'How can I ever thank you, Assalon?' she said. 'You have given me renewed confidence.' She knit her smooth brow. 'Even so,' she continued, 'I am dreading the effect all this may have on John. I am sure he will not give in easily. He will go on trying to see the girl.'

The Monsignor smiled.

'Do not worry, my dear. John is a fine, healthy young man and at his age, he will find it difficult to go on being unrequited for long. Soon he will begin to seek other interests. You must throw a party for him, Ermeline. Invite all the eligible virgins you can find. And, of course, the prettiest.'

The Countess smiled. 'You have been so good to me, Assalon.'

'The pleasure is all mine, and the gain is not only the family's, but the girl's too. That thought consoles me immeasurably.'

Just as he was leaving, John came in. This, of course, delayed the Monsignor for he wanted to hear all about the day's shooting at Mellieha.

'You've missed your vacation, uncle,' John bantered. 'Your heart seems to be in the army.'

'Ah, nephew,' the Monsignor rejoined, 'my work has fortunately within its scope even the misfiring of officers of the R.M.A.'

John laughed and went upstairs to wash and change.

'He hardly looked at me!' said the Countess anxiously.

'Never mind, my dear, John is still your son and you his mother.' After which the Monsignor took his leave.

After he had changed, John went straight into his father's room. He found the Count examining a torn cigar-band through a jeweller's eye-piece.

'What's the matter, father?' asked John. 'An accident?'

The Count removed the eye-piece and looked at his son. 'I tore this band while I was sorting it out from the others in that envelope. New arrivals, you know. I am getting clumsy.'

He would have liked nothing better than to get on with the repair of the cigar-band, but John apparently was not in a hurry to leave. Annoyed though he was, yet he found this fact rather pleasant. There had been a change in the boy: lately he never missed calling on him whenever he was at home!

Perhaps my son senses, he reflected, that I am not altogether against him over this wretched business. It was a pleasant thought, but not exactly fair to Ermelinde, was it? He must be firmer with the boy; won't do having a son playing his parents up one against the other! From now on, he would be the last person to bring the hateful subject up.

'I'm seeing her again this evening,' the boy said suddenly.

Hateful subject! He did not want to discuss it! He refused to have anything more to do with it. If he did he would have

to be firm with the boy and that would place him in an awkward situation: for he knew he could never be really firm with the boy!

'About mother,' said John, 'is she still as . . . as she was?'

The Count spread out his hands in a helpless gesture.

'Let us not talk about it,' he said.

'Well, is she?' John persisted.

The Count lowered his head over the album, as if trying to hide. 'How do you expect me to know?' he said at last. 'She doesn't tell me.'

'Oh well,' said John and he moved away abruptly from the desk. 'You may as well know, and you may tell mother, that I haven't changed my mind. I intend marrying Lucia.'

This is becoming unbearable, the Count thought in agony; why can't he talk about cigar-bands instead or even, if the worst came to the worst, about the army?

'I'm sorry, father,' the boy said. 'But I'm giving you and mother an ultimatum. If you agree and she agrees, I'm ready to wait quite a reasonable time before marrying her. If you don't, or even if mother alone does not, then I shall find ways and means to marry her at the first possible opportunity. You know what that would mean.'

The Count closed his eyes and shook his head slowly from side to side as if he did not want to hear any more.

'I will not enter this house again as long as I live.'

There was silence. The Count still had his eyes tight closed. He would not be drawn into the argument! But when he heard John making for the door, he opened his eyes in panic.

'John,' he called huskily, rising quickly from his chair. 'John, just one moment, please.'

'Yes, father?' John said, turning.

'John,' said the Count. He went up to his son. 'Look, my son, I am . . . I am going to tell you something I would never have dared to breathe to any living soul.'

'Yes?'

He licked his lips and the pallor spread over his face. 'Once,'

he began, 'before I met your mother that is, do you know what type of woman I wished most of all to marry? Sometimes the thought of it nearly drove me mad and at night, before I slept, it was a torment. I would go into the village and look at the peasant girls, and say to myself: I shall marry one of them one day. You see, it was a . . . a desire, a tremendous desire for their strong bodies, their earthy limbs, their faces full of character. I . . . found myself comparing them with the women I knew, the aristocratic young ladies, and it wasn't to the peasant girls' disadvantage.'

He paused, gathering his thoughts again. 'I yearned for something my family had been starved of for generations. It was as if fancy food had begun to sicken me and I hungered for wholemeal. I was miserable with longing—and ill, literally ill! I remember it plainly and how at that time I suffered, as well, with terrible pains in the chest. One day, in the fields, I succumbed. I took one of these women to me. She was everything I had craved all those years. I will never be ill from starvation again, I thought. . . . Well, I felt good for a time. I . . . I met her twice. When I went to her the third time something happened. I cannot very well describe it myself. Anyhow, I was sick and I would not let her touch me—would not even drink the water she brought me from a spring near by.' He gazed at his son, his face deathly pale. 'All desire had left me. And then I realized the truth—that in my veins was a type of blood, pure, unmixed and centuries old. . . . There was bound to be a clash, and there was. I was ill for a long time—perhaps not physically, I do not know. What I did know was that I could not get well again until my system had rid itself of . . . of the pollution . . . I never saw her again. Even the thought of her hurt me damnably for a while. I knew that I hated her.'

His face was beaded with sweat. His voice came in harsh gasps. 'John,' he said softly, 'I do not intend pointing the moral. You are an intelligent boy. You say you love this girl; and I am sure you will never want to hate her. But hate her you, will—if you take her!'

He took out his handkerchief and wiped his face. He felt completely spent but he would not sit down yet.

The smile on his son's face puzzled him.

'The moral,' the boy was saying. 'Don't you think it is obvious, father? That unless our blood gets . . . polluted, as you said, we'll remain the sorriest species of mankind? Afraid to leave our puny, gilt-edged cocoon in case we get sick. We're frightened of clean, fresh air.'

'But you do not understand . . .' the Count protested weakly.

'I understand,' said John. 'As for your fear that I may hate Lucia if ever I take her to me'—he added with a smile—'can't you see that is impossible now? I'm immunized, father, thanks to your delightful little escapade with the peasant girl that . . . polluted you.'

And he looked at his father with an indulgent air.

CHAPTER XVI

I

That evening, when John drove down to Vallotta to see Lucia, he found the shop closed. No reply came to his knocking. He crossed the street to the opposite side and peered up at the window in the hope of seeing at least a sign of life behind the drawn, checked curtains. He saw none.

He went to the door again and knocked, this time louder than before. There was no answer.

He was perplexed. The time was exactly as they had agreed on. She had told him: 'I can hardly wait for tomorrow to come.'

Anxiously he looked about him: perhaps she had been called away at the last minute and had not had time to leave a message for him with anyone. . . . That could be one reason why the house seemed so deserted and silent. Perhaps he could think of more reasons, each one as plausible as the rest. . . .

He watched fascinated as a man came towards him. Eagerly he thought this might be the only person in the whole town able to tell him where Lucia was. He would ask him!

He moved expectantly forward, but almost instantly stopped again. He was a small man of about fifty, but one could not exactly tell his age. He wore a cap and his face was black with stubble. His eyes were in shadow. His shirt, open at the neck, was patched and indescribably filthy.

John chuckled at his own expense. Nothing could be more improbable than Lucia leaving word for him with such a man! The anti-climax pleased him: it was amusing.

In the meantime, the man had passed him without a glance and stopped before the closed door of the shop. He looked myopically at it as if he expected it to be flung open, and then, giving a loud snuff, he turned his head to John in an angry gesture.

'That's my glass of wine gone!' the man said. 'It's the second time this week that bitch has closed up on us.'

He peered at John as if he expected him to concur with what he had just said.

'You, mister,' the man said after a pause, 'd'you think you can tell me what's going on in this joint? Regular customer I am, been waiting all day for my quart, so help me God. Regular customer I been for these last twenty years. Never known this joint closed up of an evening. Not while that bitch's father was still here. Y'know what, mister, I lay you five to one she's slutting about somewhere while her father . . .'

John could never in his life imagine that he would one day hit a defenceless man who was twice his age, and in a public place. As he hit him, he realized he was making a fool of himself. But he hit him again and this time the man sank to his knees without a groan and lay on the ground in an ugly, strangely pathetic heap.

Still seething with anger, he was conscious of running feet and hot breaths around him. There was a lot of shouting.

'Its Lucia's man,' shrieked a woman above the babel of voices. 'I saw him hit old Tancred.' The venom in her voice stung him hard so that he looked dazedly about him.

'Call the police,' bawled a man. 'Let 'em clap him in jail.'

'Nah, let's beat him up,' shouted another. 'That'll teach him an' his like to keep their bloody place. Who the hell does he think he is? Come on, let's beat up the dirty snob.'

John felt rough hands straining at his clothes. A blow to the side of his neck nearly stunned him. He gave a powerful shove backwards with his elbows until he was free of the hands. Then, feeling sick, he lunged out with both fists. He saw faces grotesquely transformed as his fists struck into them. It was more than he could bear, but he went on striking out savagely, his breath knotting in his throat.

Suddenly he was aware of Lucia: as if invoked by a spell, she stood between him and his assailants. She was saying something which in his gasping breathlessness he failed to understand.

Then she was close to him, straining herself to him, so that he could smell the sweetness of her flesh. Her face, wet with tears, pressed against his. 'It is my fault,' she kept saying. 'It is my fault. I was in the house. It is my fault.'

Instinctively he turned his head as he sensed the blow a young man was aiming at his face. Pushing Lucia violently aside, he thrust all the power of his fist into the man's chest, knocking him backwards into the crowd.

'Leave him alone,' Lucia shouted at the people, her voice straining through her sobs. 'Leave him alone. It wasn't his fault I tell you. He . . . he hit that man because he didn't like the way he was talking about me. That's why he hit him. I heard everything. Now leave him alone.'

Her shouting turned to such a weeping that her whole body shook. A silence fell on the crowd.

John put his arms around her. 'Don't cry,' he said. 'I'm afraid I forgot myself. Please, don't cry.'

He wanted to say more, but felt he could not say it there. The whole thing was so unreal, just like a frightful dream. And it was all so ridiculous, from beginning to end. Ridiculous—that was the word for it . . . utterly impossible . . . a dream!

The police-constable was young, a mere boy. He was evidently apprehensive as he elbowed his way through the crowd. They were talking all at once. 'That's him,' someone cried. 'He hit old Tancred.'

'It wasn't his fault,' said Lucia.

John pressed her to him. 'Hush,' he said.

The constable had not spoken. He looked perplexed. His hand went up unsurely to one of his breast pockets, fumbling with the flap, evidently searching for notebook and pencil.

Poor chap, thought John, let me put him out of his misery.

'Don't just stand there, you fool,' a voice shouted at the constable.

'There's no need to take particulars here, constable,' John said. 'Yes, I hit the man and I am ready to follow you to the police station where I shall make a proper statement to your sergeant.'

The papers gave the incident considerable space and political colouring.

The Left-wing papers made much of it, a special editorial in one referring to it as 'the kind of degenerate practice, typical of a degenerate class, which the workers' movement was determined to stamp out once and for all'.

On the other hand, Right-wing newspapers were just as vehement in their denunciations, one paper calling it a 'base contrivance worthy of the wickedness of Rasputin'.

Coming as it did in the middle of one of the bitterest political campaigns ever known on the Island, the incident was almost turned into a major political issue.

The Countess, on hearing about it, immediately turned to the Count and implored him to do all that was in his power to save John the humiliation of having to appear in Court on a criminal charge.

'I had a feeling that something like this was going to happen,' she cried. 'And over that girl! Oh, I feel so ashamed.'

But it was to the Monsignor that she finally turned, after hearing her husband admit in a shamefaced manner that he was completely at a loss what to do. The Monsignor was greatly distressed. 'The fool!' he exclaimed. 'The utter fool!'

The Monsignor was not a person to get easily ruffled, but he had to admit that this affair was more than he could stand. However much he tried to look at it with resignation and calmness, it produced in him nothing but anger. Coming as it did, right on the heels of the trouble over that girl, the incident threatened to disgrace them all. It was as if a curse had been laid on them; the fair name of the Family was at stake.

The very next day, he sent for Dun Saver and was not a little annoyed to receive a note informing him in a few scrawled, misspelt words that Dun Saver was indisposed and therefore unable to visit the Monsignor.

He immediately donned his hat, and went himself to the old priest's house.

The room he was shown into by Sa Matress smelt of dampness and human sweat, so that he had a hard struggle to keep himself from retching.

Dun Saver was in bed, looking ashen pale and hollow-cheeked in the bad light of the room.

The Monsignor, rejecting a seat proffered by Sa Matress, ushered the woman out of the room with scant ceremony and came straight to the point.

'Have you carried out my instructions?' he asked the sick man.

Dun Saver turned large, glazed eyes at the prelate. 'I have, Monsignor,' he said, 'and I have not.' His voice was so low that the Monsignor had to lean forward to catch the words.

'I am afraid I do not understand, reverend,' he said.

'She ran away from me when I told her to stop seeing the young man.'

'Ran away from you! But you have been her Father Confessor for years, have you not?'

'I have, Monsignor. But she still ran away from me.'

The Monsignor's annoyance was being aggravated by the nauseating smell of the sick priest. He was hard put to it to hide his feelings.

'Do you realize,' he said with control, 'that they are still seeing each other?'

Dun Saver sighed and turned his eyes to the ceiling. 'That I could not say, Monsignor,' he said. 'Please forgive me. I have been ill. I am ill now, as you can see. I have been forced to let go my hold of the situation.' He turned his head again and gazed intently at his visitor. 'If there is anything else,' he said, 'in which the Monsignor might consider me to be of some help . . .'

The Monsignor moved away from the bed. He went to the door with apparent difficulty.

'Pray for me,' he called to the sick man over his shoulder, and refusing the crème de menthe Sa Matress was holding ready for him at the foot of the stairs, he left the house.

In the street he realized at once that he, too, was losing his

grip of the situation. He had committed the unpardonable error, against which they had warned him so often in his studies abroad, of allowing his emotions to override him!

He must be careful. Already, as he now realized, he had taken an unnecessary step. Obviously Dun Saver had failed. He should have realized this fact straight away when they had told him that the girl was with John in that unseemly street brawl. Therefore his action in going to Dun Saver, to learn what he already knew, was unpardonable, since it was based purely on impulse and impulsive actions were not only a waste of time but, diplomatically speaking, dangerous as well!

He paused. He knew that he was powerless to suppress the scandal—it was already public knowledge. However, if he thought hard^r and calmly enough, he might be able to minimize its effects, and prevent it from spreading.

The Monⁿignor's mental recuperative powers were great. Even now he was well on his way to complete recovery. He felt very calm and collected. Now he could begin to think constructively again.

The next move was obvious. He would personally contact the man John had foolishly struck down and make him drop his charge. It was as simple as that. The man should not prove too difficult to handle. Illiterate, most probably. Fairly easy game. And after that—what?

There remained the girl. She was the core of the whole situation.

He must make certain that where Dun Saver had failed, he should succeed.

3

It was his Captain^h who informed John that the charge against him had been dropped. He called John to his office and broke the news to him.

'Her ladyship, the Countess, phoned me up a moment ago,' the Captain told John. 'She asked me to pass on the news to you.' He held out a hand. 'I'm extremely glad, John.'

'It seems,' he said after a pause, 'that the man in question

has not only dropped all charges against you but intends making a public declaration to the effect that he deserved it all for the things he said about your girl-friend.'

John looked blankly at his superior officer.

'Is that necessary?'

'I don't know,' replied the Captain. 'If I remember rightly, your mother also said that this fellow has got someone to prepare for him a statement for the Press. It promises to be a highly entertaining aftermath. I'm more than glad things have worked out the way they have.'

John shifted his position. He held himself stiffly.

'Captain,' he said, 'I wish to resign my commission.'

The Captain, in the act of lighting a cigarette, remained with the match burping between his fingers and a look of complete stupefaction on his face.

'Are you serious?' he asked.

'I am, sir,' replied John.

The Captain blew the match out. He shook his head.

'Very well,' he said at last. 'We'll go over the formalities later. That is not before another week.'

'Forgive me, sir,' said John, 'but I request that the matter be considered before then, and . . .'

'Well, it can't,' snapped the Captain. He stubbed his half-smoked cigarette in the wooden ash-tray. Ash spilt over some papers. He said without looking at John: 'This interview is over, Lieutenant. You may go.'

John saluted and left.

4

The notoriety he had achieved pained him. People he had never seen before in his life came up to him in the street and shook his hands; others made their dislike equally obnoxious, in various ways. A man had spat on the ground as he passed.

His thoughts, however, were with Lucia, and the change that had come over her.

Leaving Police Headquarters for the last time, he made straight for her home, determined to get to the bottom of it.

She was in the shop. Ignoring the presence of the two or three men at the tables he went up to her.

'I want to speak to you—alone,' he said. He felt tensed.

When he repeated his request, she parted the curtains of the door leading into the house and went through them. He followed her. 'What has come over you, Lucia?' he asked her. 'What has come between us?'

He tried to take her hands but she instantly withdrew them.

She was very pale. 'We must not try to see each other again,' she said.

He passed a hand through his hair. 'But why?' he asked her. 'Don't I deserve an explanation? Haven't I loved you enough to deserve one, Lucia?'

'You must not press me,' she said.

'So there is something. Something you would rather not tell me?'

She did not reply at once.

'Tell me: is there something?'

She looked at him then. He had never before seen the look she had in her eyes. He did not understand what it meant.

'We must never see each other again, John,' she said. 'I . . . I will have it so. Our love cannot come to any good.'

'But what are you saying . . .?'

'It is as I say. Please believe me. Please.'

Why doesn't she weep, he thought, when that's what she wants to do most of all? Her eyes glistened and he knew she was keeping great control over herself.

'You must go now,' she said.

A man in the shop was calling for her.

'Someone's calling.' And before he knew it, she had left him.

He parted the curtains and entered the shop. She was filling a tankard and had her back to him.

He walked slowly to the door. Outside children were playing in the street. A ball rolled towards him, he kicked it. There were sudden cries of 'Goal!'.
A

As he walked on unseeing, he wondered dimly what the children were shouting.

CHAPTER XVII

I

The Monsignor felt once more at peace with the world. Through his immediate intercession, his nephew had been spared the ordeal and humiliation of the Courts. Soon the incident would be completely forgotten.

The Press might go on belabouring the affair for a few more days, and that was all.

By virtue of his training and rare good sense, the Monsignor understood perfectly the nature and value of red herrings, and he had outlined a plan with the editor of a certain political newspaper, by which the attention of the public would be drawn from this unhappy affair. The ruse was of the simplest kind, but one which had proved its worth in affairs of this nature over and over again. Soon the paper concerned would appear with an editorial, interspersed with phrases in bold type, deploring the private lives of some of the leading members of the opposite political party.

In a sense, this was a new experience for the Monsignor, for he had long made it a rule never to interfere either directly or indirectly in the politics of the country.

He felt now, however, that what he was doing was absolutely necessary if the Family was to be adequately safeguarded. Moreover, he could place complete trust in this particular editor, whose son happened to be a Seminarist and was passing through a difficult time in his chosen vocation.

In return, the Monsignor had promised the editor to do everything possible to ease the predicament of the young Seminarist; even to the point of lengthening for him the probationary period.

So that was that. A perilous chapter in the history of the Xiberras line would soon be closed for ever. The Family would once again be free from the smear-threat.

He could now begin again to view the more private matter

of his nephew with that customary genius with which the Almighty had graced his mental faculties.

Not that he was not grateful to a degree for this rude interlude! For, he thought, had it not been for the fracas, he would have gone on relying exclusively on Dun Saver to achieve his purpose. With the consequence that irreparable harm might have been done to his plan.

John's quick outburst of temper, with its ensuing result, had opened his eyes, just in time, to the fact that putting all the cards on the old priest was a great mistake, and that he should from now on take a more direct interest in the matter.

However, in spite of the many vicissitudes his original plan had undergone, he still held fast to his opinion that John should be left strictly alone. It was to the girl that all his faculties should now be directed.

He expected an easy victory. She might have run away from Dun Saver, but she would not run away from him. Some of these old priests were so ingenuous when problems of this kind arose!

He lost no time in finding out the girl's address. This done, he called his housekeeper and sent her with a note to Lucia.

2

The moment she read it, Lucia's thoughts went back to that scene in Dun Saver's room. The connection seemed as obvious as if the Monsignor had been a witness himself of her unfinished Confession.

Although something inside her had prevented her from going again to Dun Saver, to beg his pardon and tell him that after all she was following his advice, yet she could not erase from her mind her untoward behaviour on that fateful afternoon.

She read the Monsignor's note again, and as the idea formed in her mind that Dun Saver had reported to the prelate her almost sacrilegious manner towards himself and the Sacrament of Penance, her hands began to tremble.

She had never met a Monsignor. Now the thought that soon she had to face one filled her with dread. There was no telling,

she reflected anxiously, what awful punishment the Church had in store for such of her children as openly rebelled against any of her ministers.

'Tell the Monsignor that I will come,' she told the woman after a pause.

She felt she must obey the summons. She had rebelled against one priest; surely it would be madness to rebel against another!

She went slowly upstairs. She changed into new clothes and carefully arranged her hair, thinking how dearly she had to pay for her short-lived happiness with John.

At the thought of him, her lips quivered, and she hastily turned away from the mirror. She loved him so much, so much more than she could ever hope to love again. . . . She remembered the look of pained surprise, his helplessness, when she had moved away from him, refusing to allow him to touch her. He had little realized the craving in her!

I still love him, she murmured, O God, help me! I want him even now. . . .

But she must stop thinking like this. She must try to forget. For this was the end. There must be no trifling with the things of the soul. . . . Better suffer now, on this transient earth, than court the horror of eternal fire . . . ! Dun Saver's words, in Confession, had been clear and emphatic: 'You must not see him again.'

She shuddered and her hand swept to the neck of her frock. The buttons gave her a little trouble but she fastened them, one after the other, slowly, with fingers that refused to function properly.

She must suffer, for both their sakes. John must suffer, too. She wished she could take on herself all the suffering there might be—hers and John's. She hated to think of him suffering.

Don't let him suffer, too!

She glanced at the clay Madonna and in the sadness of that little face she felt an echo of her own.

She went to the Monsignor through streets that percolated an intense cold.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Monsignor's immediate reaction when he first set eyes on her was a feeling of pride.

The Xiberras women had all been beautiful, and this girl before him was a match for any of them. John had the true Xiberras instinct for beauty. . . .

He felt a little sad. Pity her background is so wrong, he thought. She looked an intelligent creature, too. And he was struck by the fineness of her features.

For the first time in his life he felt, a little sadly, the awful responsibility of class. For a moment, he visualized a world in which all men were equal. The picture elated him strangely.

He shrugged his shoulders almost immediately, realizing the improbability, almost the sheer, wanton heresy of his thoughts; and then wondered mildly how different his opinions might have been had he embraced the priesthood on the strength of a vocation!

But that was neither here nor there. This was not the time to think of what might or might not have been. It was not in the power of man to turn back the clock. One had to look forward; one must reach a conclusion.

After all, the Family was a vocation, too!

He must be firm with this girl. There must be no equivocation. The matter must be settled.

'It has been reported to me,' he said in a slow, clipped tone of voice, 'that you have been seeing a lot of my nephew.'

She raised questioning eyes.

'Your nephew, Monsignor?' she said.

'John.' He spoke the name clearly. It left his lips with the terseness of an axe falling on wood. 'It is true, is it not?' he asked her.

She bowed her head, the warm colour rising from her neck and suffusing her cheeks. But it was only for a short moment. She raised her eyes again and looked at the prelate.

'It is true, Monsignor,' she said.

He received her assertion with a lift of his eyebrows.

'I am more than appreciative of your candour, my child,' he said.'

There was a pause during which he regarded her steadily. He realized that undue firmness was unnecessary. Above all, he must be tactful. Tactful and not firm.

He said: 'Permit me to say that you are a maiden graced by the Almighty with considerable refinement. Also, I have no doubt that your personal conduct is impeccable. It has been my constant pleasure in my career to come across maidens of your class endowed with such high attributes. It is as if God, in His infinite wisdom, wanted to recompense some of them with such graces as are evident in you for what they lack in other spheres. Are you following me, my daughter?'

Her eyes had not left his face while he spoke. Now she nodded her head slightly.

'I am, Monsignor,' she said.

'Well,' he resumed, 'I hope I am making myself clear.'

'Indeed you are, Monsignor,' she said.

He shifted his position in the chair. He was slightly perplexed. He had been prepared to find the interview a little taxing; he had even been prepared for a repetition of that rebellion that had upset Dun Saver so much. He had expected, before he saw her, to find her a highly strung, temperamental girl. Difficult to handle. A difficult person altogether. . . . Instead, there she was, one of the most docile and obviously sweet-tempered daughters of Eve. A doubt troubled him: perhaps she was not really in love with his nephew. Perhaps, while John had gone about looking lovesick and forlorn, she had wanted nothing more from their association than amusement and, not improbably, his money. . . .

His tone was severe when he spoke again.

'Do you love, really love my nephew?'

'I love him very much,' she said simply.

No, no, I have been wrong about her, he thought firmly. For this is candour, pure and simple. There is no doubt about it. She neither looks nor talks like a gold-digger, and I believe

her when she says she loves the fellow; after all, my nephew is just the chap to steal a maiden's heart; he is so handsome, bless him! . . . This was a delicate situation.

'Listen to me, child,' he said. 'Life is complex. Life is a mixture of undercurrents: a composition of countless factors. However much we may dislike the idea, there is no escaping this fact.' He had spoken hurriedly and he paused a moment for breath before resuming: 'Now this love between you and my nephew is a noble thing in itself. However, it is not—! It is not—life! How shall I explain it? It is just a weed in a sea of weeds. It is not alone. It is with the other weeds, and these weeds push it this way and that and attach themselves to it, so that it stops being a thing on its own. Are you following me?'

'I think I understand,' she replied.

'Good,' he said, and sighed. 'Well, to continue with what I was saying . . .'

He stopped as he saw her rising from her chair. He looked at her with surprise. Surely, he thought, she is not going to run away again!

'What are you doing, child?' he asked. 'Why are you standing?'

'Monsignor,' she said, 'I speak from the fullness of my heart. As I have already told you, I love your nephew, and without him, my days are endless and the nights empty. . . . I know why you have called me here today. It is to give you an assurance that I shall no longer associate myself with your nephew. It may perhaps surprise you, Monsignor, to learn that I had already given myself that assurance.'

He leaned suddenly forward and made as if to speak.

'Forgive me, Monsignor,' she said at once, 'but I wish to continue. . . . I decided to give John up not because of any considerations of class—forgive me, but I must speak as my mind and heart dictate—but because I was afraid for my soul.'

He rose from his chair.

'Soul?' he said.

'Yes, Monsignor. My soul. It is my most precious possession. I prize it above everything else.'

He smiled at her. 'But, of course,' he said, 'is that not how it should be? Your soul is indeed your most precious possession. But, forgive me, I still fail to follow your trend of thought.'

For a fraction of a second, she looked away from him. Then said: 'At first, when I began to love John, I did not question my soul, for then it was still whole and pure, and somehow my love for him seemed to make it more so. I was happy and I was glad for my soul. My Father Confessor himself blessed our love for it was wholesome and pure in his eyes, too. Then suddenly everything changed . . .'

'Changed!'

'My Father Confessor who had blessed my love and made my soul happy for no apparent reason suddenly changed his mind. When . . . when he asked me to stop seeing John, I realized that, somehow or other, he saw evil in what he had once regarded as pure and blessed. My soul, which had not troubled me before, now burdened me with the weight of sin. It was a sin I could not comprehend but which I felt just the same. And because I cared for my soul, I decided to stop seeing your nephew.'

'There,' exclaimed the Monsignor with a happy sigh, 'was that not a sensible thing to do? If, in your love, your Father Confessor saw an evil which you understandably were too blind to see, was he not wise and right?'

She placed her hand on the back of a chair as if for support. It was the same chair the old priest had held on to with the desperation of the moment, struggling to find strength . . .

'I do not know what else to say,' she said weakly.

'There is nothing else to say, my child,' said the Monsignor. 'I fully understand your viewpoint and sympathize with your difficulties. As I said, life is full of cross-currents, and disappointments. But no one of us should allow disappointments to blind us to the fact that something worthwhile can still be made of this complexity we call life. You are young, my

daughter. Life lies before you. Discard the past with its difficulties and errors, and look into the future. God is kind to women.'

He had to admit that these last few minutes had overtaxed his energy. The blue vein over his right temple stood out prominently above his florid features. And though he would have hated to admit it, he was still unsure of her. There was something about her that told him that victory was still some way off. He must be patient. He must not relax his vigilance.

Somewhere, at the back of his mind, ugly, sinister and impelling, lay the thought of money—however great the amount—the last resort, if it became necessary!

He looked at her. She was still standing by the chair, and he noticed how irresolute she looked. Strangely, it gave him no joy to see her thus. . . . He could not help feeling that in that young, handsome body of hers, a search was going on. A search for something deep inside her, perhaps. He could not tell. . . . Perhaps when she had found what she was searching for, she would lay it before him . . . he wondered.

He stood, waiting for her to speak. His instinct told him to hasten and show her out of the house. But it was overruled by the strange fascination of her struggle.

At last, she turned her head, and he was instantly aware of a transformation. It was the eyes of a woman that she turned to him. He could not bear to look at the flame that lurked in them. . . .

'Monsignor,' she said, 'I intend keeping to my assurance not to see John again—on one condition.'

'Condition!' he echoed. 'What condition can there be?'

'On one condition,' she said again. 'That you tell me whether the change in the attitude of my Father Confessor was caused by you or not.'

He stiffened at her directness. For an instant an expression of anger swept over his face, then he had control of himself again.

'Why do you ask such a question of me, child?' he said condescendingly.

'Because my soul is weighed down by an evil. I wish to free it again.'

'It is preposterous,' He simulated a smile.

'Please forgive me,' she said and made a step towards him. 'But I implore you to answer my question, Monsignor. It is for the good of my soul. I cannot go on living, feeling so unhappy and afraid for my soul, and yet not know why!'

He saw tears now, in her eyes. What was he to tell her in reply? Never had he come across a situation such as this!

'For the love of God, Monsignor, I implore you to tell me!'

He chose his words carefully.

'If I told you—yes . . . if I told you that I did instruct Dun Saver to exert his influence on you that you might leave our boy alone—what then?'

'I would understand,' she replied quietly. 'A family such as yours—one would go to great lengths to defend it. And somehow, it would be right. And I would understand. And my soul would be free again, for then I would realize that Dun Saver did not really look upon my love as evil. That would make me so happy, Monsignor.'

He hesitated. Of course, it was out of the question. Admitting something that could wreck his whole career, turn his name into a public scandal! It was unthinkable. It would be like confessing one's sins in public.

He was hardly able to control his voice. 'You do not know what you are saying,' he said. 'Allow me to point out that your attitude is entirely incorrect, almost sacrilegious. The interview is at an end. You may go. Just one thing: do not try to see John again. Of that I must warn you!'

She did not move.

'You have not given me an answer, Monsignor,' she said. 'I must have an answer before I leave your presence. It is my happiness and the well-being of my soul that are at stake.'

'Soul, soul!' he exclaimed.

She said hopefully: 'Can I take it then that you instructed Dun Saver?'

'I did not instruct Dun Saver.' He almost shouted the words

at her. The blue vein throbbed visibly, and he had a maddening sense of failure which goaded him unmercifully. 'I told him nothing. You are blasphemous, woman. To think that you and my nephew . . . It is monstrous!'

In the silence that followed, he heard her words as if coming from a great distance.

'Then it is true that my soul is evil as my Father Confessor said. . . . And yet I still love John.'

'Please leave now,' he said in a low, hoarse whisper. 'Please go. If your Father Confessor told you it is evil to go on loving my nephew, then it must be evil. There is no more to be said. It is now your concern and yours alone to cure this evil. Come, I will show you to the door.'

After she had gone, he sank into a chair. He sat there for a long time.

CHAPTER XIX

On the morning of the first day of the General Elections, Toni was put on a stretcher and wheeled into the operating theatre. When he was told that he was going to be operated upon, his anger was great.

'You're all damned Nationalists,' he screamed at the top of his voice. 'That's what you are. You've picked this day so that I won't be able to vote! Mintoff will hear of this, you mark my words. Bloody Nationalists!'

The doctor tried to remonstrate with him.

'It would be highly dangerous to postpone the operation,' he said calmly.

'Then let me die,' Toni shouted at him. 'So long as I give Mintoff my vote.'

It took the doctors and nurses some time to quieten him down.

Once properly installed in the theatre, his violence subsided. He lay back still and pale, his eyes staring.

When the doctor passed him, he grasped his gloved hand. 'You won't let me die, will you?' he said. 'It's for my little daughter's sake, you see. She's all alone. You won't let anything happen to me . . .'

The doctor smiled and tweaked Toni's ear. 'You just leave everything to us,' he said. 'And, for goodness sake, relax. And don't you think it would be a good thing if you prayed? Pray, you old heathen.'

And Toni closed his eyes and prayed; and all the time he prayed, he was seeing the Virgin, but the Virgin's face was Lucia's, and her smile and her hands.

He was puzzled, but soon there was nothing to puzzle or think about. . . .

When he came to again he was back in the ward. The doctor walked in, talked in whispers with the nurse for a time, then walked up to him.

'Well?' he said, his young face lit by a smile.

'Well,' said Toni through thickened lips. 'Am . . . am I all right?'

'Quite all right, as things ago,' the doctor replied.

I am beginning to like this chap, thought Toni. A nice young man, even though a Nationalist. Damned Nationalist! He wondered what kind of a quirk made a man a Nationalist! . . .

Five days later, the doctor came up to him again.

'I've got some news for you,' he told Toni. 'I bet it'll please you. I suppose it'll be just like a tonic to you, which is just as well, you old so-and-so. Labour has won.'

Toni's shout of joy startled all the other patients. He shouted till he could shout no more.

The doctor, looking considerably distressed, tried to quieten him down.

'Now stop it,' he kept saying. 'Shut up, Toni. I shouldn't have told you.'

However, Toni would not be stilled. And it was only when the young doctor, looking very red and very nervous, said bitterly, 'It's just like you! You're going to land me in a hell of a spot with the Superintendent!' that he finally quietened down. He felt sorry for the doctor. A sense of well-being flooded through him.

'Don't worry, doctor,' he said with a chuckle, 'I'll throw in a good word for you, now my Party's ruling; that is, when I'm well again, even though you're a dirty Nationalist.'

When Lucia came in that evening, the doctor took her aside.

'As I told you, it's the best we could do, Lucia,' he told her. Her hand fluttered to her heart.

Noticing the gesture, the doctor added quickly: 'There's no immediate cause for alarm, Lucia. The fact is, however, that his ailment was already well set in when he came here. But we shall do our best for him. Please, be a good girl, go in there and cheer him up a bit. Though, on second thoughts, I don't think he needs any more cheering up today. He looks and sounds as if he's going to be our Prime Minister any minute now.'

He smiled as he said this, and she smiled, too. Then she went in to her father.

Even before she got really close to the bed, Toni noticed how pale she looked and how deep were the shadows under her eyes. My girl is suffering, he thought instantly. And he forgot the elation of the past few hours. My girl is suffering!

'Lucia,' he said, taking her hand, 'you have not worried over me, I hope.'

For answer, she patted his hand and kissed him on the forehead. The gestures pleased him, but something about her manner seemed to disquiet him. He looked closely at her. There was definitely something. . . . Was it that she had lost weight or that she was so pale?

No, it was something more indefinite. Something that made him look upon her as a stranger—however well he loved her! He was suddenly keenly conscious of her hand in his. He could picture it quite clearly without even looking at it, the structure of its bones and the pale skin. It was his girl's little hand. But now it felt different.

He knew then that he was holding the hand not of a girl but of a woman. He gasped at the discovery and a chill ran through him. Slowly, hardly daring to breathe, he withdrew his hand from hers. He did it self-consciously, as if he had no right to touch her flesh. She was a woman, and all intimacy was at an end. . . .

All this he felt intuitively and he suffered a pang of jealousy. He wondered how deep the whole thing had gone. He asked her.

'I have stopped seeing him, father,' she replied almost immediately.

His mouth fell open. Stopped seeing him! Then that paleness, those shadows, the pinched look . . . ! Anger welled up in him.

'He has jilted you, the scum,' he said.

'No, father,' she said, 'I was the one who broke off the association. . . . But let's not talk about it. It is something I want to forget. Please, father.'

He fidgeted in his bed. Whatever she said, he must know. He had every right to know. He opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Something seemed to hold the words back, locked in his throat. It closed a door between them, irrevocably. From now on there were things he would never be able to bring himself to utter or discuss with her.

The boy in the next bed was weeping and calling for the fat nurse. Lucia went to him and spoke to him. She tried to console him. But he kept calling for the fat nurse. That was all he wanted.

At last she came, hurrying.

The boy, still sobbing loudly, stretched his hands out to her. She sat on the edge of the bed, close to him.

'What is the matter now?' she asked. It was a girl to her doll; a mother to her infant.

The boy could not stop weeping. He kept sobbing and looking at the nurse. Then he could not help himself any longer, he put his arms round her waist and laid his head on her fat bosom. She let him remain like that, and his tears trickled down the starched front of her tunic.

Toni turned his head away, sick with longing. What would he not give, he thought in agony, to put his arms round Lucia and have her weep her sorrow on his heart?

But all things were not equal. That boy was a child, and Lucia was a woman.

Not just his little girl any more.

CHAPTER XX

I

The Count had been waiting over a fortnight for half-a-dozen choice cigar-bands from Fiesole, and they had not arrived. He felt irritable and had a headache.

Matters were further aggravated by conditions at the Villa. It had become an unbearable place to live in. His wife went from room to room with such a disconcerting air that he dreaded coming face to face with her during her aimless wanderings about the house. She hardly addressed a dozen words to him the whole day.

And then, there was this worry over John. That incident in which his son had been involved had left a strong impression on his mind. It had come as a great shock to him. For the first time, he had really felt the outside world aligning itself against him. For a moment he had felt afraid. He had even lost all interest in his cigar-bands, while this impression lasted. And that was a bad sign. . . .

So that he was greatly relieved to learn that the case against his son had been dropped. He was more than grateful to the Monsignor—Assalon was just the right person for such a job—and proud, too, of having such a brother. The Family need not fear while there was such a man as Assalon about!

The matter had discomfited him more than John's news a little later that he intended leaving the army for good. The Countess had taken this news badly, but he, on the contrary, had been strangely pleased. He had never been keen on having a soldier for a son. He would have dearly loved John to be an artist, instead—or even a collector, preferably of cigar-bands. . . . But such things were in the hands of Providence.

His head was still throbbing—all the pain seemed to be concentrated above his left eye—when the maid appeared and informed him that Master John was downstairs with her ladyship and had expressed the wish to speak to him.

When he entered the living-room, he found John standing in the middle of the room, and the Countess sitting in an arm-chair a few paces away from him.

She seemed perfectly relaxed. But he knew better: that's only a pose, he thought, inside she is all tensed up!

John greeted him with a smile although his manner remained formal and aloof.

'Well, John,' the Count said. How thin and pale the boy looks!

John clasped his hands behind his back and surveyed his father. 'Father,' he said, 'I have something to say to you and mother.'

'So I gather,' the Count said. 'What is it all about?'

John looked straight at him.

'It is about the girl I love,' he said. 'Her attitude towards me has changed lately. And as I know with perfect certainty that she still loves me, I'm wondering whether either of you could tell me why she has changed.'

The Count looked at John with surprise.

'Tell you why she has changed!' he said. 'But this is the first we have heard of it. How can we enlighten you on such a matter?'

John turned to his mother. 'Well, mother?' he said.

He need not be so abrupt, the Count reflected, there is something in this which displeases me; somehow it is not correct!

The Countess gave a little, nervous laugh.

'What a thing to ask us, my dear John!' she said. 'Of course, it is as your father has just said. How do you expect us to be aware of . . . of this girl's moods?'

'That's enough, mother,' said John.

It is all wrong, the Count thought. He changed his position in the chair. 'You seem upset, John,' he said a little weakly. He wished he could have said something much firmer than that. After all, the boy was not behaving at all well. . . .

'I am upset, father,' said John. 'Someone has been interfering in my affairs. I don't know this for certain, but I can feel it. And, by God, I mean to find out who that person is!'

'You need not swear,' said the Countess.

'Forgive me,' said John.

'Surely the girl herself should know if someone is really interfering. Why does she not tell you?' The Countess was perfectly composed as she spoke.

John looked at his mother for a while as if she had put to him an interesting suggestion. Then his face creased in a frown.

'She won't,' he said.

'But have you asked her?'

'No.'

'Then why don't you?'

'I don't think she will tell me.'

'Surely . . .'

'I feel, I know, that she won't tell me,' John interposed harshly.

'It is strange, said the Countess.

'I feel it in me: she won't tell me even if it cost her her life.'

The Countess rose.

'Oh well,' she said, 'I am afraid we cannot help you, John. I must go now. I have several things to see to.'

'Wait, mother.' He put out a restraining hand. 'There's something else I want to tell you. As you know, I shall soon be leaving the regiment; I cannot remain an officer after what has happened. I am also leaving this house.'

The Countess darted a swift glance at him. That was all. It was almost imperceptible; it might never have happened.

'Leaving this house,' she said with perfect calmness.

'John, you're not serious?' said the Count.

'I'm leaving this house. Already I have an offer of a flat in Valletta.' John looked at his mother. 'And I shall enter this house again only if and when you give your unreserved approval to Lucia. Only then and on that condition.'

'Are you not being rather too hard on us, John?' said the Count.

The Countess was smiling. Her smile was just a parting of her fine lips. 'And what do you intend doing on your own?'

'I will concentrate on winning Lucia back.'

'I see.'

'I'm only doing what I think is best.'

'The best!' exclaimed his mother. Her smile had disappeared; a faint, pink colour had crept to her cheeks. 'Do you pretend to know what is better than your father and I do?'

'In this case I do, mother. I know what I'm doing. I'll go tomorrow. Unless, of course, you change your mind before then.'

'Never.'

'Ermelinde, please,' begged the Count.

'Never,' she repeated.

'Very well,' said John.

He watched his mother leave the room. She held her head erect and steady. Except for a hint of uncertainty in her feet, her walk was poised. You dear old aristocrat, he thought, you will be weeping soon in that room of yours. You and your comic opera stuff! But I can't help you, I can't!

He turned to his father who had risen from his chair the moment the Countess had prepared to leave the room. He stood feet together, his head slightly inclined—a perfect example of textbook etiquette. A lump rose to John's throat as he watched him. How far apart was he from his parents? And how much of his parents' old-world manner was in him? If any at all!

'Father,' he said, 'please, believe in me.'

The Count looked about him as if searching for something he had lost. Then he raised his eyes to John. Tired eyes.

'My son,' he said slowly, 'I shall always believe in you. But never, I hope, at the expense of your mother's happiness.'

Then he laid a hand lightly and momentarily on John's shoulder, and quietly left the room.

Watching his father's receding figure, John was conscious of an end. He wished he knew where the new beginning lay.

CHAPTER XXI

John's flat was at the top of an old palace of the Knights. Below him were other flats which seemed to be inhabited solely by children, so great was the noise. In front projected a balcony, a low, wood-and-glass structure overlooking one of the many narrow streets of Valletta. The view from it was another old house turned tenement, with washing draping the balconies and windows on horizontal, arrow-wise poles. There was no end to the washing on the house opposite as there was no end to children's shouts below.

From the windows and the small open terrace at the back, the view was more promising. Overlooking the greater part of the Grand Harbour it provided a fresh and peaceful aspect.

The flat had been hard to get. It belonged to a lawyer-friend of his. Or, rather, it belonged to the lawyer's family; since he had married two years ago, he had not used the flat but had gone to live in another of the family's houses in the country. When John happened to mention that he was looking for a flat, the lawyer had jumped at the opportunity and rented it to him at a nominal rate.

The days seemed interminable to John, and uneventful. He weighed things up soberly. He had broken with his family. He had given up his career. He was living on his nerves. And he still loved Lucia with an intensity that surprised him.

She had become to him more real than anything else he had ever known or felt or touched. At night, with the window of his bedroom wide open to let in the soft, tangy breeze of the Harbour, he would lie awake and his craving was as great as he could bear. Tomorrow, he would say to himself, I shall try again. She can't go on running away from me for ever, for she loves me, I know she does. And he thought of her eyes and of her lips. And the morrow would come and he would go down to Lucia's street again. Sometimes the door and the windows of her house would be closed and there was a silence of emptiness. At other times, he would walk past the open

shop. She would see him, while serving, and then turn away. He would make up his mind to go to her. But her stricken, half-reproachful eyes would leap to his mind, and he would hear her words again, the finality in them: 'We must stop seeing each other.'

He rose from the bed and lit a cigarette. He crossed to the open window. The sky was clear and lights were on at the Dockyard and on the ships. The night breeze lapped gently the lapels of his house-coat. And he swore at himself for being so weak, for not taking what he wanted. Tomorrow he would go again and he would speak to her and say: 'If you love me, say so. And it will be like old times again. And what you fear, whatever it is, will be as nothing.' And she might not turn away from him, and from his kisses. . . .

But he knew he would do nothing of the sort. And he cursed his blood. However hard he tried, looking on at the tantalizing quiver of the stars on the Harbour water down below, he could not find a way to overstep that one thin line dividing his overwhelming desires from the 'correct conduct'.

He envied those men who mated without scruple or question according to their fancy. Perhaps, if he did not love Lucia so much, he might be able to override his scruples; perhaps he could leave gentlemanly behaviour behind and to hell with 'correct conduct'. And not be sorry.

With Lucia, however, it was different: he must wait; even though, paradoxically, he was doing his best to forget this lineage, though he told himself he was born no better than any other man or woman—or Lucia. It was all wrong and meaningless, this distinction. Yet he could not free himself of it. . . .

Then he felt hatred. He clenched his fists. Above everything else, even the way he was made, he knew he hated most of all whoever or whatever had brought about this change in her. And his hatred was all the more intense because he was helpless. Because of it and the sleepless nights, he thought somehow of Dun Saver. The face of the old priest came up to him, slowly, from the water, many yards below where he stood. And the old priest stood before him in the manner of a sorry ghost. . . . Suddenly it was Carnival.

CHAPTER XXII

Even before the sun had scaled the hills of the southern coast, there came a hum from the centre of the city that sounded different from any other day of the year. It rose and steadied in suspension beneath a flawless sky. The atmosphere was unmistakable, even at that comparatively early hour. The mood was set for the revelry that was to last three days and nights.

As the shadows shortened, the first groups of children wearing colourful oddments appeared in the streets. Their faces were hidden behind grotesque masks, most of which they had manufactured themselves. The hideousness of the masks was an improbable piece of childlike ingenuity in which black and crimson largely figured. The barrel-organs, festooned with paper streamers and fat balloons, crept up the steep by-streets, jingling tunes in a medley of noise—tinny *Traviata* vying with a brash brass *Rule Britannia*. . . .

In the Palace Square, round a gaily painted pole, children dressed as Turks of the Ottoman Empire simulated warfare with others representing Knights of St John. The white, eight-pointed Cross of the Order sewn into the mantles looked too large and incongruous surmounted by the tiny, plume-hatted heads of the children. The promoters of this children's *Parata* stood by regarding the children's exhibition with jealous indulgence. For their part, the children, looking extremely self-conscious, continued to belabour each other with papier mâché sticks and swords. They appeared extremely well drilled so that the show lacked spontaneity. But the people's applause rang out. The promoters beamed, the children looked more self-conscious than ever. . . .

The crowds grew, and the coffee-shops and the bars filled up steadily. Small groups of adult masqueraders dashed through the crowds with whistles and shouts, charging with their heads down as the people pelted them with sugar-almonds, cheesecakes and confetti.

The heat became intense. People sweated freely. The women

worked their fans with jerky movements of their hands.

And so the morning passed with a promise of more to come. The gaiety had been great but slightly contrived: a warming-up, like pushing a car a short distance to start the engine off.

After the hiatus of the afternoon, the evening began in earnest with unimaginable noise, dazzling colour and light and a seething mass of people bent on enjoying themselves. Someone set off a string of Chinese crackers on one of the roofs, and the loud, metallic noise seemed to inject the people with a new abandon. Now, truly, it was Carnival.

Couples in fine costumes danced in hollows formed by the crowds. When the dance was hectic and complicated it earned deafening applause; when it was dull and the steps uncertain it was greeted with a shower of cheesecakes, pennies and good-natured yells. The people laughed and shouted till they were hoarse. When they were not shouting they blew on whistles, turned rattles or blew on klaxon-horns. There were times when the din was practically unbearable. The high, ancient walls of the city hemmed the noise in and amplified it.

The shadows were few and far between, so strong were the coloured neon-lights. They lay round some monument among trees; or in some hidden corner, blitzed and yet to be rebuilt; or where an old woman crouched in a darkened doorway too sick to move, too tired even to ask for alms from unheeding passers-by. Other shadows perhaps where a poster blared in the red lettering of the Tourist Bureau: 'Come to Malta for History and Sunshine.' Shadows, too, crazy shadows on another kind of poster stuck to a church façade: 'Do Penance for your Brethren in Sin.'

Inside the church, in the dim light, the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for such good Christians as desired to pray on behalf of the Sins of Carnival. 'Deliver us from Evil.' 'Withhold your righteous wrath, O Lord.' A few people knelt, advocates for their prodigal brethren, before the Throne. 'They know not what they are doing, O Lord.' . . .

It promised to be the best Carnival ever, they said. This Carnival had everything. . . .

John had got up late that morning. But the moment he stepped outside something of the spirit of the day gripped him and he felt elated. He laughed at the antics of the masqueraders. Life was good. And he thought of Lucia as if she were waiting for him just round the corner, ready to run up to him with a happy smile on her face and outstretched arms.

He could hardly believe that the nightmare of the last few days had ever come to pass. It was nothing but a mood of hers, he said to himself. A mood that had to pass one day, and what better, more glorious day than this!

He was full of these thoughts, and though he had considerable difficulty in making his way through the crowds that were gathered in the centre of the city, yet nothing could dull his joy of anticipation.

It was when he reached Lucia's house that the cold, numb feeling he had come to know so well lately came back to him. The house was closed. He did not knock; it was no earthly use. For the house was like a body without a soul.

He turned away. Perhaps she was visiting her father. Perhaps, even now, she was up in the city somewhere, caught up in the crowd. Perhaps she was in every conceivable place he could imagine.

It was no use; and then, as he walked away, he felt a little fear. Suppose, at this very minute, he thought, she's actually in the house; suppose I turn back, and I see her, can I bring myself to speak to her? . . .

As he turned into Kingsway, he came face to face with his friend and landlord, the lawyer.

'The very person I've been wanting to see,' the lawyer said. 'I've just been over to your flat.'

The lawyer eyed him quizzically.

'You don't look too good,' he said.

'It must be the weather,' replied John with a smile.

'You need livening up, my dear chap,' remarked the lawyer, taking John's arm. 'Look, I'm down here for the day. It's an agreement between me and my wife. First day of Carnival is all mine, see? And if you're willing, it's yours, too. So let's

start right away. There's a little place I know where the clients are few and picked, the lights don't hurt the eyes, and the sweetest barmaid you've ever laid eyes upon. It's Carnival, after all! What d'you say?'

'I say it's fine,' said John after a pause

CHAPTER XXIII

I

In a street, narrow and dimly lit—a street of great shadows—a house shows no light except at one small window on the first floor. Inside the room, a man is dying.

To look at him, stretched to his full length in the centre of the high, large bed with the brass knobs tarnished and grey, and the bare framework of a canopy above it, is to feel that death has already claimed him. He lies still under the creased bedclothes; his feet point upwards, with bulging toes like a corpse in a coffin.

Only his face still holds a flicker of life. His face is as alive as his own thoughts allow it. His mouth moves continuously, though what he is saying, if he is saying anything at all, is not communicated to the other two persons in the room.

One of them, a priest, has donned a surplice and stands reading from a thick book by the light of two candles that burn with small, static flame one on each side of a table Crucifix. He mumbles as he reads, and he reads hurriedly but with evident concentration. Now and then, he precedes a new page by glancing at the sick man. Then for another long interval he devotes himself to the book.

The other, a woman, is dressed completely in black and her head is covered by a black shawl. Only her face and fingers show. She sits straight-backed in a chair in one corner of the room. Her eyes are fixed unwaveringly on the sick man's face. Her lips are drawn so thinly together that they hardly seem to exist at all. Her long drawn face shows like two deep, parallel lines leading from her chin to the edge of the shawl on her head—and nothing else.

It is still in the room except for the vague din, many roof-tops away, of the city's madness.

The sick man moves, and the priest with the book lifts his head instantly. He remains tensed for a while, then slowly he

inserts a ribbon marker along the corner of the pages he has been reading and closes the book. He bends over the sick man.

'Dun Saver,' he whispers, 'It is I. Is there anything you require?'

The sick man turns his face slowly to the priest, and for a space he looks steadily at him with eyes larger and brighter than when the doctor left some time before. But he does not speak.

'Are you ready for confession now?' asks the priest, enunciating each word with laborious precision.

For a moment, the sick man's eyes remain open. Then they flicker, then open again, but their fixed stare is now different.

'Why are you afraid, Dun Saver?' asks the priest. 'It is I. Do you not recognize me? I am your Confessor. I am here to help you.'

But the eyes of the sick man still stare and his lips begin to move again, unspoken.

The priest sighs. He straightens himself again, dips his thumb in the bowl of Holy Water on the table, and with it makes the sign of the Cross on the sick man's forehead and on his lips and on his chest.

Then he looks at the woman sitting immobile in the shadows.

'He still does not seem to understand, Sa Matress,' he says in a whisper.

The woman glances at him for a second, then her eyes turn again to the face of the sick man who is her brother.

The priest sighs and returns to his reading. But something seems to be disturbing him, for he looks around the room, this way and that, until his gaze falls on the window.

'Are you certain the window is properly closed, Sa Matress?' he asked the woman. 'The noise seems to be getting louder.'

But he receives no answer, so he moves from his position and goes himself to the window. It is closed fast. For a moment his eyes rest on the aura of light above the distant roof-tops, but almost immediately he lowers his eyes and takes up his position again by the sick-bed.

He has no time to reopen the book, however, for a sound from the bed draws his instant attention. Once again, he stoops and puts his face close to the sick man's.

'What is it, Dun Saver?' he whispers gently. 'You spoke just now, did you not? What is it you want to tell me?'

As if by virtue of long and constant movement, Dun Saver's lips at last emit a word.

'Lucia,' his lips say.

'Lucia?' says the priest. 'Yes, what about Lucia?'

But Dun Saver is silent again.

The priest turns to Sa Matress.

'He is asking for Lucia again,' he says, 'An hour ago, when he first mentioned her, I asked you whether you knew anyone of that name and you nodded. But that was all. Why do you not want to bring Lucia here, Sa Matress?' His voice is kind but slightly reproachful. 'It is imperative that Lucia be brought here,' he adds more firmly. 'It is a grave matter of conscience, with you, with both of us.'

His eyes do not leave the woman after he stops speaking. And they remain fixed on her, even as she rises slowly to her feet, goes to the door, opens it and disappears from his view.

2

Through the dark, deserted streets of down-town walked Sa Matress, her slight, black figure breaking and rethreading the shadows, her footsteps pattering dully on the cobblestones.

She was surprised to find the girl's wine-shop closed. Tremblingly, she had expected to find it full of people and light and noise, more than usual tonight considering the festivities. But the street was silent and bare and Lucia's house was in darkness except for a light upstairs.

She knocked.

She heard footsteps inside and a moment later the door opened and Lucia appeared on the doorstep.

'Sa Matress!' the girl exclaimed.

'Come with me,' said the woman at once. 'My brother wants you.'

'What does Dun Saver want of me?' Lucia asked her.

'That is not for me to say,' replied Sa Matress. 'But I advise you to hurry.'

Lucia entered the house and reappeared almost immediately with a dove-grey shawl around her shoulders. Then she closed the door behind her.

Sa Matress was already walking ahead. Lucia followed, though she did not try to overtake her.

3

Their footsteps echoed through the labyrinth of the small streets.

And yet it was a queer sort of echo. It began hollowly, and stretched until it seemed to arrive at a spot where it met the other kind of echo—the echo of the wide city, loud with the reckless noise of the crowds.

There they stood, the two echoes, just for a second, before they were engulfed within one echo. And yet they remained strangely separate. The cadences of the tumult and the grave clatter of the women's footsteps on cobblestones were a whole and yet distinct one from the other. They made a queer echo.

In it was the stamp of the night. This strange, idiosyncratic night. A kind of night in which anything could happen. A night of strange contrasts. . . . And the two echoes symbolized it, as the women walked, one two yards ahead of the other, through streets of cross-purposes.

But the echoes did something else that night. They linked the two separate worlds of the lovers: while Lucia, cold and apprehensive, followed Sa Matress to the old priest's house, John, barely a hundred yards away, stood with his friend, the lawyer, on a balcony high above the riot of Kingsway.

4

Below him, the street was one surging mass of people gone crazy with Carnival fever. It bubbled and frothed with spurts of shouting and singing. Fireworks crackled and spat upwards from the tops of innumerable roofs. Two bands passed by. The

bandsmen wore comic hats to which long paper streamers were attached. The people milled around them, sometimes jostling them, sometimes knocking their instruments with their shoulders. But they played doggedly on. It was as if their very lives depended on their ability not to drop a single note.

Then the floats appeared, monstrously wide and high, swinging crazily above the people's heads to the rhythm of the bands, and the grotesque masks, gaudy papier mâché creations extraordinarily huge and fantastic. Someone let off a small fire-cracker near one of these masks, representing Don Quixote; there was a moment's shrieking scamper among the crowd, and Don Quixote all but toppled over. His large, bony ascetic face actually looked very much concerned. . . .

From the balcony, John watched, his face pale and set, his thoughts not in the wild scenes before him.

The day had passed as he had wanted it to pass—quickly. He had drunk heavily with his friend; more than perhaps he was accustomed to, and while the image of Lucia had persistently intruded between him and the glass, there had come a time when it hurt him no more and he could think of her with the half-real air of soporific indulgence. Confronted by this image that neither hurt nor sorrowed him, he had given up the idea of trying to see her again, preferring the certainty of his mental picture to the possibility of further rebuffs.

He would have drunk more, just for the sheer sensuous pleasure of thinking about Lucia, but the lawyer had dissuaded him with a gentle but firm hand.

'It won't do, old chap,' the lawyer had said.

Damn the fellow, he had thought, does he think I can't take drink like the rest of them? He knew how it would be; that night the lawyer would get back to his wife and say to her, 'That chap's going to pieces. You should have seen the drinks he had!' And she would say, 'He should have his head examined.'

He had laughed suddenly, and was conscious of people turning round to stare at him. When the lawyer took him by the arm and hurried him off to the flat, he still wanted to go on

laughing, but all he could manage was a giggle at every few steps.

At the flat, he was violently sick. He retched so much that he thought he was dying. With the retching the image of Lucia left him, and he sank to the bed chilled and groaning. He was filled with an overpowering feeling of self-disgust. Then self-pity. He could have sworn that the lawyer had hit him. Then he slept.

It was late in the evening when he woke up. He found the lawyer looking down at him. He must have remained in the room all that time.

'Please go, leave me alone,' he said. 'I want to sleep.'

But he did not sleep. At last he rose, went to the bathroom and had a shower.

The water refreshed him a little. He wished the lawyer had gone and left him. He wanted to be alone.

'Do hurry up, John,' the lawyer's voice came from the other side of the door. 'We shall miss the Carnival procession.'

The procession. What was that to him? It was all very well for the lawyer! This was his great day. He could do what he pleased. An arrangement with his wife. Do what he pleased! Drinking a few drinks, talking aloud, a gay bachelor again. Just for a day. And then a few more drinks and then the procession. And after that back to the snug bosom of the family. Roll out the red carpet—welcome home the gay dog. . . .

It's ridiculous, thought John, ridiculous and damned petty. But what wasn't petty? Including his escape to an illusory Lucia on the strength of half a dozen drinks!

God, if that wasn't petty, what was?

Now here he was, with the lawyer, on the balcony above Kingsway. It belonged to a large house and the people were friends of his, the lawyer had explained to him.

The balcony was almost completely fully of people when they got to it. John had the impression of people talking loudly and laughing louder still. He concentrated on the seething street below him. It gave him a feeling of vertigo. He closed his eyes tightly and he knew that they were full of tears. . . .

When he opened them again, he found himself staring straight at a grotesque mask that was as high as the balcony itself. He stared at it in fascination. It represented a man with eyes as large as car-wheels and a cavernous mouth in which lay a huge dish of grapes and a woman in Oriental costume. The fantastic figure was so near that he could have touched it.

He followed it with his eyes, and instantly he saw in his mind the little alcove in the church, and Lucia sitting next to him, and they were both listening to the old priest. The priest's face was flushed and his eyes burned bright with hope and love. Love for the lovers. And a blessing that was as soothing as a cool hand on a burning brow.

The grotesque figure had passed down the street, and another was making its way slowly through the dense crowds and approaching the balcony.

He turned away with a sick feeling inside him. And a hope.

If ever there was a man who could put things right again between him and Lucia, surely that man was the old priest of the little alcove.

He was surprised he had not thought of it before

CHAPTER XXIV

I

Night falls ever in the room of a dying man. Slowly and noticeably; even though the spent candles have been replaced by new ones and the light is strong again and the shadows weaker than the light.

Night falls even then.

The eyes of the dying man never leave Lucia's face. It is as if by one last supreme effort, this clinging to the face of the girl, is repaying him with another clutch-hold on life. His lips still move, it is his eyes that do not move. Not even by the slightest flicker.

Sa Matress is in her chair, and her old eyes burn thinly with hatred for the girl.

The priest with the surplice has at last sat down and he looks unseeingly at the pages of the open book on his lap. Every now and then his head nods sharply as though in agreement with some passage in the book. But it is the tiredness of the flesh, at this late period in the long vigil, that is slowly overpowering him.

Lucia stands still and, conscious of the importance of it, keeps her eyes fixed to those of the dying man. Only now and then do her eyes turn to his contorting lips, waiting.

His hand moves and slides slowly down the low mound of the bedclothes. It is gaunt and long and blue-veined. Lucia notices its slithering movement. She reaches out for it and takes it in a loose grip. But the hand wriggles feebly, and she knows it is not for her. She lets it go, then watches it moving slowly this way and that, from the priest to the woman in the corner, one finger bent outwards. . . .

The slight sound it makes rouses the priest from his fatigue. He rises and bends over Dun Saver. 'What is it?' he asks.

Dun Saver raises the hand and lays it against the priest's chest. Then he points with it to his sister.

Sa Matress is the first to understand. 'It means,' she says, 'that your reverence and I are to leave the room.'

The priest looks at her with some surprise, and then at Lucia, and then back at the sick man.

'It is his wish,' Sa Matress says.

The priest gives a slight shrug of his shoulders. Then he follows Sa Matress out of the room.

Now there is the effort and the new will. But with the new will to speak comes the fear. It is evident in his eyes. The words come softly, almost inaudibly, from his lips.

'Lucia,' he says, 'you have not finished your confession!'

She bends over him slowly, the tears filling her eyes so that she can hardly see his face.

'Lucia,' he says again, 'it is a confession that must be finished.'

She asks, hardly able to speak 'But why? Is it true that this thing is evil? Is it so?'

The fear creeps into his eyes. For a startled moment, they look past Lucia's head and at the window. He seems to be listening for something very difficult to hear, and the intensity of his listening stops momentarily the quivering of his lips.

'Hush,' he says at last, 'do not speak so loud. You must finish your confession. Your soul must be purged of this extraordinary love. It is imperative that you lay aside . . . lay aside . . .'

She nods her head silently, wishing herself certain, free of all doubt.

She is already beginning to kneel when the door opens and John enters.

At first she is more aware of the surprised faces of Sa Matress and the priest framed in the dark doorway than she is of him. He is like a blur before her eyes; but when he takes her hand, it is as if her hand had always been in his. . . .

'Lucia,' he whispers hoarsely, close to her, 'you must come away from here. Somehow, I do not know why, I dreaded finding you here. You must come away.'

He finds the priest standing questioningly before him.

'You do not understand, Father,' he says. 'And I cannot explain, for it is only a feeling I have and not a reason. You must let us pass.'

Her other hand is held by the sick man, and she is conscious of it and surprised at the grip in which it is held. She is powerless to free her hand and she feels in near-terror that she must not try. When John sees this, he hesitates a little and he pales. Then he is between her and the sickbed and with deliberate slowness, but with hands that tremble, he releases her hand from the sick man's grip.

As in a sick vision, she sees John holding for an instant the dying man's hand. It looks limp and weak, and she is conscious of the passing of a power to which, a moment ago, she had all but surrendered. John holds the hand for a while, looking down at it as if still unsure of it, then he lowers it and places it gently by the side of the sick man.

Then he leads Lucia past the priest and the woman, and out of the room. The stairs are dark, but he holds on tightly to her hand, and he does not let go of it even when they have passed through the door and out into the street that is pitch-dark.

2

He walks hurriedly, and, because he is leading her, she hurries, too. They do not speak, and her sobs and his harsh breathing seem like one and the same thing.

He follows her into her house and, in the dark and the silence, they are still silent. Her sobbing has stopped, and his harsh breathing. It is the pounding of their hearts they are trying to hide.

He places his arm round her to steady her up the dark stairs, feeling each step together, the dark removing walls and ceiling, leaving far behind a sick man's bed and deathly candle-light—giving them the security of vastness and aloneness. . . .

They enter the room, and their eyes turn together to the dim light before the Virgin.

This small room is a haven after their terrible escape; it is

the other end of the vastness they have crossed to leave behind things they have known and dreaded. Even all guilt.

He helps her to lie down on the bed and gently removes the shawl from around her shoulders. And while his fingers stroke her face, her eyes are on him.

'Oh, John,' she murmurs, 'Oh, John.' She puts out her hands and draws his face down to her.

'Oh, John,' she murmurs again, over and over again.

They remain like this for a long time, in this room that is far away from everywhere.

He can feel the warm, hard arches of her thighs, and his fingers pass over her bosom, to the top of her frock, unbuttoning it, until it is open.

CHAPTER XXV

The candles have been changed again, and the priest has been relieved by another. He is tall and angular; his surplice hangs limply from his thin shoulders.

Only Sa Matress has remained throughout. She watches still, as if watching the sick man is the eternal thing for her to do now.

The priest is preoccupied with his prayers: he says them with much feeling. He is still very young, and the dying and the dead are still new experiences to him. All his training is now for the first time being put to the test. He must acquit himself well.

Sa Matress's thoughts, if she still has the energy to think, are of the sick man. Her eyes never leave his face. It is as it should be.

But the sick man's thoughts are of himself alone. They keep his eyes open when by right they should have closed long ago: the inward eyes of the memory, sad and cruel memory that will not let the body die as it should. It is interesting for the body rarely survives the deathly ashes which a departing spirit leaves behind it.

But it will not be long now. God is merciful. He erases in one last, merciful act the torments of hell. It has been a bad, excruciating hell—breaking you up inside and making of your pieces a gesture that nips young, innocent love.

What of that love?

There was the girl running out of the room, hysterical and blasphemous. Surely it was blasphemous, that act of hers—running away in the middle of Sacred Penance, taking with her her new guilt. . . .

What of that love, Monsignor? Monsignor is not God; but Monsignor is wise; he knows. He has studied the hearts of men and the little god inside them.

But what of that love now?

Guilt multiplies itself. If only he could have thought of that

—at the right time! He might have appeared wiser than the Monsignor. But then, his wisdom would certainly have appeared pretentious and pretension is the sister of pride.

Where does it all end, God?

Humility and obedience were the tenets by which he had tried to guide his life, all his life. You know that Yourself, God, don't You? Therefore . . . therefore, could he hope that he had not seriously transgressed? And that it was not a sin that he felt burdening him, forbidding his body to die?

And yet, what of that love? In whose keeping is it? Yours, God? Let it be Yours! And he would know one day that he is sinless! Let it be Yours!

He moves his head and sees the aura of candlelight around the thin priest.

And he imagines himself already dead—the pillow is hard and cold. Like a slab, and on his chest the crush of the marble. The epitaph he cannot read. Why had they to write it in Greek—or is it Latin? This is not the Latin of the Liturgy, certainly, for if it were, he would be able to translate it. If not Greek, it is difficult—such long words, so huge and so black. They fill the slab on his chest from end to end, from top to bottom, with sufficient space for a Bishop's mitre with enormous grey tassels. . . .

It is the innocent daydream of his lifelong humility.

The slab after all is small and not of very good marble, either. It bears just a plain cross and below the cross his name. That is all.

But the feet of the girl are upon it. They cross and recross, now on the name, now on the plain cross. . . . They seem so restless, those footsteps; and they press on his chest. Why does she not leave him in peace? Will she always be there—the child he once knew, the woman he has lost? One soul of child and another of woman in those impatient feet, the tormenting feet, the tragic feet. . . . Tragic, I tell you, whatever the Monsignor says!

He should have told him that, too—she would press on his chest. If only he had been wise enough! And the slab looks

so frail; it cannot stand much longer the pressure of the girl's feet as they cross and recross. An extraordinary restlessness.

He says to the aureoled priest: 'Now I confess.' It is a hopeful expression.

Sa Matress rises and leaves the room, closing the door silently behind her.

The thin priest moves forward, expectant: with his slim hand, he traces a large, meticulous Cross over the sick man.

Dun Saver confesses in a weak voice.

'Even now it is late,' he exclaims in a frightened whisper.

'The girl was here and I persisted with the artifice. God, God forgive me.'

Some of his words are almost so incoherent that the thin priest has to put his ear very close to the moribund's lips.

Then when there is no more to be said, the priest utters the words of absolution word by word, meticulously and as loudly as possible for the dying man to hear.

They are the words of comfort. Of forgiveness.

'Go meet thy Maker, with a full heart.' It is done. It is enough.

'Go thou in peace, O Spirit.'

Dun Saver dies with his eyes wide open. The priest finds it difficult to draw the eyelids over them. He gets a little flustered, and his hands tremble—he is conscious of a little failure in his meticulously executed vigil.

He prays to himself a little breathlessly. And at last he succeeds—but only partly.

It needs an experienced hand. Experienced in the way of dead men's eyes that refuse to shut out the thing they dread.

Part Two

**'Thou, a cherub stretched out and
projecting, and I set thee in the
holy mountain of God : thou
hast walked in the midst
of the stones of fire.'**

EZEKIEL XXVII, 14

CHAPTER XXVI

This was a good time. He had found living in a flat in the city on his own a pleasant experience, made pleasanter still by the fact that he was now always near to Lucia.

He had joined the staff of a Travel Agency, and every evening, after his work at the office was done, he went down to meet her.

She had stopped working in the shop. With her father's agreement, she had leased the shop to a man who had to close up his own wine-shop when a new American bar had opened 'almost in my tap-room' as he explained.

After seeing the man well established behind the counter, Lucia had the door leading from the shop into the house bricked up with concrete blocks which could easily be removed again when the lease came to an end, which, of course, could not be before her father returned from the hospital, a cured man.

John took her somewhere different every evening—to the pictures, cafés, the park, concerts, stage-shows or on car-rides round the island. This was the best time of their lives.

They never mentioned that strange night of Carnival, so long ago it seemed now, when they had both stood over a dying priest and run away in fear to find shelter and oblivion in each other's arms. But the warmth, the heady discovery of that night were still in them.

Sometimes, when the street was dark and they stood taking leave of each other on the pavement outside Lucia's house, John would hold her to him and she would cling to him. And a madness would seize him and he would be keenly aware of the time, the best in his life. And she felt the power of his longing, and a quiver ran through her and she disengaged herself from his arms. She kissed him lightly on the forehead and escaped his outstretched arms.

'Till tomorrow,' she said, standing for a moment in the open doorway.

He smiled and was grateful to her. The walk back to his flat was a slow but tolerant purge, so that he arrived humming under his breath, completely satisfied with what he had and craving for nothing else.

Then he slept deeply and contentedly, untroubled by dreams.

One morning on waking, he found his father in the room. He lay still for a moment, staring at the Count with disbelieving eyes through the last remnants of sleep. Then he sat up in bed, put his arms round his knees drawn up under the bed-clothes and calmly surveyed his father.

The Count was standing at the foot of the bed. He looked smaller than John had ever known him. His serious, puckered expression gave his face an oddly disproportionate shape. The light from the window falling with a hard glint on the large opal ring on the middle finger of his right hand seemed to deflect from his face in sharp lines of unimaginable sallowness.

John got out of bed and went into the bathroom.

'I'll be with you in a minute, father,' he called back.

He was a long time in the bathroom, hoping his father would tire of waiting and leave. But the Count was still there when John finally emerged rubbing a towel against his face, and smiling.

He went to the table and lit a cigarette.

'This is a surprise, father,' he said 'Won't you sit down?'

The Count sat on the edge of the bed and watched quietly as his son changed and dressed. His eyes seemed to follow every movement that John made. He watched without expression.

'How is mother?' asked John, brushing his hair.

'Your mother is as could be expected,' said the Count; and only then did he lower his eyes and his fingers began turning the ring on his finger.

'Have you had any breakfast?' asked John.

'I have.' The opal glinted dully and jerkily. John watched curiously the turning of the ring while he buttoned up his shirt. How will this end, he thought. . . .

'It has been a long time,' said the Count at last, almost apologetically. 'Things are not the same at home.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Your mother does not know that I have come here.'

'Doesn't she?'

'No.' The Count rose to his feet. He was still fidgeting with the ring, and he appeared agitated. 'Your mother is so adamant. John,' he said. 'I have remonstrated with her. But to no avail. The fact is that I have missed you.'

Turn, glint, turn, went the large opal.

'I have missed you, my boy.'

He laid a shaking, uncertain hand on John's shoulder. 'Why do you not come home?' he said. 'I know that it would be difficult. Most probably, your mother would not even look at me. But having you here, things would be at least bearable for me.' He stopped and his fingers went to the ring again. Then he added, almost hurriedly: 'Please do not blame your mother too much, John. It has been a bitter blow to her. Do not forget that she is a woman and a de Balyard! That is something which it is important to bear in mind. I . . . I am a man and, though of blood akin to hers, yet I know the feeling that has assailed you, and so, if you came home, we would be able to bear each other.'

John finished his coffee and rose. He said calmly: 'You know my conditions, father. I haven't changed my mind. I'm sorry.'

The Count bowed his head and looked at his ring but he did not touch it. Without looking up, he said: 'How far has it gone?'

'Very deeply, father.'

'You have slept with her?'

'Yes.'

The Count shrugged his shoulders as if unburdening himself of something that had lain on him for a long time.

'That is different,' he said. 'You may not be as fortunate as I was.'

'I do not understand.'

'Remember the peasant girl I told you about. There were no complications. In your case, there might be.'

'If so?' asked John.

'If there are complications in your case, then it is an accomplished thing. Your mother would then be more than ever adamant.'

He held his hat before him with both hands.

'You have been a good son to me,' he said. 'And although I have lost you, you will be always in my heart. But now I shall ask of you one thing. It is this: if there are complications, I hope, I earnestly hope that you will not abandon the woman you have taken unto you.'

John looked at his father with some surprise. Then he smiled. 'Why, on earth should you imagine', he said in a puzzled voice, 'that I would ever abandon her?'

The Count looked towards the window. His eyes were half closed as if the light was too strong.

'It is the way our blood is made, perhaps,' he said quietly, his face puckered in many lines. 'I refer to the risk of pollution and the subsequent disgust of self and hate for the woman. If what you have done were in any way fulfilled, then it would be tragic if you were overwhelmed by the feelings of disgust which I myself have experienced. That is all.'

'Yours was not exactly a love affair, was it?'

The Count nodded his head sadly and looked at John.

'It is true,' he said. 'But the risk remains. I shall pray that you continue to stand by her whatever happens. I am aware that I am saying things that would sound blasphemous in your mother's ears.' He passed his hand over his face with a tired gesture. 'However much I regret your choice of liaison, yet I love these people, my son. For whole generations, they have been sadly exploited by people like ourselves. It is inescapable that I should feel sorry for them, however much I am grateful to God that I am not one of them. It is this perhaps which Ermeline fails to understand in me: In spirit and heart I belong to these two alienated worlds. . . . Will you promise me?'

Impulsively, John took his father's hand. 'Of course I do, father,' he said.

The Count hesitated, searching for the right words to express the feelings that swamped him; feelings more powerful than any he had ever experienced.

'It is of my grandson that I am thinking,' he said suddenly.

And before John could get over his surprise, the Count had walked to the door, opened it and departed.

CHAPTER XXVII

I

After leaving John's flat, the Count went to see his brother.

To his inquiries, the Monsignor's housekeeper replied that the Monsignor had left town that morning to celebrate Mass in a village in honour of the silver jubilee of the Parish Priest, and had not yet returned.

'I shall wait,' said the Count slowly. 'Kindly show me to the Monsignor's study.'

He felt sick and irritable. His visit to John had upset him. It had been most disturbing to discover how much he could miss the boy. Now, of course, he could not possibly try to entice him back home, considering the new developments in the situation. It would be unfair to so many people, if he did such a thing: unfair to Ermelinde, as well as to this girl, his son's mistress.

He looked about him. When had he last been here to see Assalon? He could not remember: years and years probably. Their ways had parted quite early in life; since then, they had left each other strictly alone. His brother's visits to the Villa were not, he was sure, due to any desire for his company, but rather for Ermelinde's. They spoke the same language, those two, had many things in common, principally, ideals. . . .

Oh well! He studied the bare waiting-room, giving a perfunctory glance at the Caravaggio 'Beheading', and began conjecturing the number and types of people who normally made use of it. There must be scores of them, he thought, all with problems of their own. He wondered how many of them emerged again with their problems solved, and how many left no better off than when they had entered.

Now I am one of these, he mused, I would never have thought it possible! Here I am begging after my brother's wisdom—but then I may have something to tell him, too. It might not be so one-sided. . . .

When he arrived, the Monsignor welcomed him with open arms. They went to the Monsignor's study.

Together they drank a glass of sherry each. The Monsignor was evidently pleased with the visit.

'Tell me, what has brought you here today?' he asked his brother.

The Count looked up from the glass.

'It's this business of John's.'

'Oh?'

'I feel upset over it.'

The Monsignor smiled indulgently. 'You need not afflict yourself, Thomas,' he said. 'It is not as distressing as you think. Soon, you mark my words, he will tire of her. Fortunately, she is a virtuous maiden.'

The Count brought his hand firmly down on the desk.

'It is my considered opinion', he said, 'that they should be joined in holy wedlock. And the sooner the better!'

'Thomas!' exclaimed the Monsignor, 'what on earth are you saying? Have you taken leave of your senses?'

The Count's sallow features turned a dark-red hue. His eyes glittered.

'What am I his father for?' he almost shouted. 'I say that he and this woman should be married.'

The Monsignor smiled faintly.

'Your interest in the case', he said slowly, 'does you credit, Thomas. Even though it comes at such a late hour.'

The Count rose to his feet, stung by his brother's words.

'I am right in what I propose. I have every reason to know what I am saying.'

'And what about his mother, your wife and my dear sister-in-law? Tell me, what about her?'

The Count looked nervously at his ring. 'The problem is now outside her province,' he said. 'The situation is altered. It bears a new significance.'

'Oh,' rejoined the Monsignor. 'And how has this come about? For all I know, they are both waiting for the most propitious time to put an end to their association. By the

Saints, Thomas. I know the Xiberras. So I can safely declare that I know my nephew, too. A Xiberras never, never deviates for long from the right path. We always go back to it in the long run. It is the magnetic pull of the line.'

'Well,' said the Count bitterly, 'you had better see for yourself what has gone wrong with this magnetic pull, as you term it.' His words held a cynical inflexion. 'This time the magnetic attraction seems to be completely negatived. John will never be pulled back.'

'Kindly clarify yourself, Thomas.'

He fidgeted with the ring. 'He has slept with her,' he said.

'No!' The Monsignor's face was a picture of surprise.

'Well, it's true,' said the Count. 'He told me so himself.'

The Monsignor took control of himself.

'Of course, John was pulling your leg,' he said.

'John was never a one for such silly practices,' the Count said coldly.

The Monsignor clenched his fist and tapped his forehead with it. 'Fool!' he exclaimed. 'Fool that he is!'

'You realize now, don't you,' said the Count calmly, 'that marriage is absolutely essential.'

'Marriage!' repeated the Monsignor. 'Marriage! It would be utterly ridiculous, even to contemplate.'

'But . . .'

'It is out of the question.'

'But think of the disgrace! Apart from other, more human considerations.'

The Monsignor was cool and 'collected—he was his old self again. 'There will be no disgrace,' he remarked quietly. 'The situation is far from irreparable, my dear Thomas.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Time will tell,' the Monsignor replied. He rang the desk-bell. 'You need not worry, Thomas. John will never marry this girl.'

The Count frowned and the stiffness crept into his voice again. 'It would be the most sensible and fairest thing he can do in the circumstances.'

'Sensible! Fair! Do I hear you aright?'

'Yes. It would be grossly unfair to the girl and . . . and the unborn child, if my son does not marry her.'

'Thomas, my dear chap,' said the Monsignor in a hurt voice. 'Can you not realize what is at stake? The Family, Thomas, the Family—nothing less than that!'

The Count squared his shoulders. He looked distinctly taller, and for a space, there was some resemblance, however small, between the two brothers.

'To hell with the Family,' he said. 'I am talking about justice and humaneness.'

'Thomas, control yourself . . . You mentioned justice and humaneness. What is the Family if not that?' Monsignor smiled at his brother. 'You are losing all sense of proportion, my dear Thomas. Come, you look upset.'

At last the door opened and the housekeeper appeared.

'Never mind now, Maria,' the Monsignor told the woman. 'I will show my brother out myself. Come, Thomas.' And he held out a hand to the Count.

2

The walk from his brother's house to the Club was a great effort of will. The Count sank heavily into his favourite arm-chair and asked the steward, who had approached deferentially, to bring him some brandy.

He closed his eyes. He felt so tired that he could not think properly. Everything seemed to be in such a haze—this morning, for instance. What exactly had made him leave the Villa at such an early hour to go to see John? He did not know! Perhaps it was just an impulse, the expression of a dim hope that by so doing he could bring order and reason to bear on his life once more. Yes, that was what was at the bottom of it—a desire, a consuming desire to revert to the old pace, the serene tempo of life to which he had been accustomed. Yes, the Count reflected as he sipped his brandy, his motive had been a purely selfish one.

But then there had been John, with his disturbing news,

and he had found himself wondering why he had never thought that there were certain things even more important than cigar-bands. For all he knew, there was going on, at that very moment, the slow, silent, invisible germination of a part of himself in a woman he had never set eyes upon . . .!

Images writhed before him like the golden liquid in the glass. He remembered John when he was born, and the vision pleased him as much as the actual fact had done so many years ago. He remembered his delight and his pride in fatherhood. And now John had projected his delight and pride still further by sleeping with this woman he had never seen in his life!

Strange, wonderful thought. All the disappointment he had felt when Yvete had born a girl with no possibility of other children returned to him, but only to stress the excitement he felt now that a woman held in her the seed of his grandson.

For he had no doubt about it: John would give him nothing but sons!

And this grandson came and stood before him, and he was proud of the boy, and there was nothing more beautiful in the whole wide world than this son of his son. . . .

He sipped the last of the brandy, and his hands shook as illegitimacy crossed his mind. He felt cold. He put the glass down and clasped his hands to stop their shaking.

He resolved. He resolved that his grandson would never, never bear that stain, not if he could help it! Whatever his brother said, John must marry the girl, at once, before it was too late. . . . No matter what his brother said, or Ermeline.

He would go to Ermeline and stand before her and say quite firmly: 'John must marry this girl. For she is bearing my grandson, and he is to come right in the world, do you hear me? My grandson must have everything, my name, above everything else. . . . To hell with the Family, to hell with de Balyard, to hell with protocol, to hell with my brother! I speak in great earnest.'

He was still shaking when he left the Club. He could not see properly. A haze swam before his eyes. He crossed the

street, unaware that he had been barely an inch from death and that the car's driver was shouting something after him. . . . He walked as fast as he could, only dimly aware that he had left his hat at the Club and that the sun beat on his uncovered head with an intensity that would have been unbearable at any other time.

It did not matter. Only one thing mattered. And that was, that his grandson must have a name, his name.

He could not afford to lose a grandson, not now Yvette had shrivelled up inside, and there was only John left.

He would go up to John and say: 'John, marry her. Give a name to my grandson. I want him as if I were his own father. Marry her as I would marry her if it were at all possible. It is something I want you to do for me.'

It would be easy. For wasn't that what John himself really wanted? And he would give him his blessing—even if Ermeline did not give him hers. After all, he was still the head of the family. In the eyes of the law, at least. With Ermeline, he would deal firmly, and at the proper time. As for his brother, he would show him who was the cleverer of the two. Let his brother stick to church business and stop interfering in the matter of grandsons!

He went up the long, twisting stairs to John's flat. And when he reached the landing, he stopped for breath. He stood panting against the banisters, his hand on his heart, too weak to move.

He thought he was going to die. It would be terrible dying there, in the dark, in a strange building, right on his son's doorstep. Terrible to die before he had seen and saved his grandson.

At the thought, panic gripped him, and he breathed deeply for a full minute to regain his strength and disperse the pain.

When his panting subsided and he licked his dry lips, he felt the strength in him again. He knocked on the door.

The door was opened by a squat, fat woman holding a yellow duster in one hand and a silver ash-tray in the other.

'What do you want?' she asked.

'My son,' he said. 'He . . .'

'Do you mean Master John?'

'Yes, yes, that is right. I must talk to him.'

She shook her head, and he noticed how neat she was. Not like his brother's woman—slovenly, impertinent hag!

'I'm sorry, sir,' John's woman said. 'Master John left the flat barely five minutes ago. I'm wondering how you didn't meet him outside.'

'Can . . . can you tell me where he has gone?' He hoped his voice was steady, and that she could hear what he was saying. 'I must talk to him, you understand . . .'

'A message came for him, sir. From a Monsignor. Monsignor Xiberras; yes, that's the name. I remember it for the master told me it himself. Won't you come in, sir? Perhaps he won't be long.'

The Count leaned with a hand on the wall. He felt the weakness coming on him again.

'No,' he said. 'No, thank you. I . . . I think I'll go down again.'

'Shall I tell the master that you've called, sir?'

'No, no, it does not really matter. He . . . he need not know. As a matter of fact, I was here earlier this morning. Nothing really important . . .'

'Very well, sir, as you say.' She flickered the duster over her shoulder.

Even she sees through^o me,^o he told himself; she can see I'm not worth bothering about. . . .

He said, as steadily as he could: 'I am sorry to have disturbed you in the middle of your work. Please forgive me. I shall go now. I may^o meet John outside.'

'Very well, sir,' she said. She flicked the duster off her shoulder again and closed the door.

Very nearly in my face, he thought.

He felt a sudden anger. But it did not come to anything. There was only tiredness and a slight apprehension at the sight of the long, twisting stairs. He would take his time going

down those stairs. They seemed endless, but, at least, this time they went down not up.

3

John found his uncle waiting for him. He was struck by the expression on the Monsignor's face. It held a certain sadness in it that disturbed him more than the sight of his father had done that same morning.

He took the Monsignor's hand with real concern. As long as he could remember, he had never seen his uncle in such a melancholy mood; he had always thought of him as one on whom the burden of life rested lightly.

'I have just learnt some very distressing news, John,' the Monsignor said in a stricken voice.

And he proceeded to tell John all that he had learnt from the Count.

'As you yourself will bear me out,' said the Monsignor, 'I have never interfered with your way of life. However, this situation is so pregnant with risks that I could not do otherwise than call you to me in the hope that together we might conceive something which would avert probable catastrophe.'

John smiled.

'Surely that is an exaggeration,' he said.

'Ah,' rejoined the Monsignor, lifting a hand. 'I wish it were!' He turned his sad eyes on his nephew. 'Of course, you realize what you have done,' he intoned.

John shrugged his shoulders and looked his uncle in the eye. He was beginning to feel slightly sick.

'I know,' he said. 'I have sinned. But I have no intention of letting the matter stop there. I will marry Lucia at the very first opportunity.'

'That is impossible.' The Monsignor spoke in such a low voice that at first John could not make out what he had said.

'Impossible?' he said.

'My dear nephew, you seem to have forgotten one point—that no Xiberras has ever married below his station. Alas, that is nothing but the truth.'

The colour rushed to John's face.

'This is a matter of love,' he said.

'Is it not likewise a matter,' asked the Monsignor weakly, 'which involves the social order most intimately?'

'If you've called me here just to tell me this, uncle, I'm afraid you're wasting your time.'

The Monsignor was momentarily taken aback by the passion in his nephew's voice.

'Forgive me, John,' he said. 'But I was thinking of the effect all this might have on the Family. Enough damage has been done already—forgive me for being so blunt. First there was that vulgar altercation with a drunkard, then your resignation from Her Majesty's Service, and now, well . . . this! My heart bleeds for the Family.'

'Mine bleeds for it, too—but for another reason. The Family is absolutely preposterous, a thousand years behind the times. It makes me sick to see the way it sticks to ideas that should have been left to die and rot when Napoleon kicked the Knights out of the country.'

The Monsignor smiled.

'You forget', he said, 'that Napoleon was kicked out of the Island by the British barely two years later.'

'I'm holding no brief for Napoleon. I'm just dating the Family.'

'I quite see your point. But seriously, John, it would be most untoward to precipitate things, do you not think so? A moment's weakness does not necessarily imply that the irremediable has been committed. Therefore I should advise you to wait before you do anything that may prove entirely uncalled for.'

'What exactly do you mean?'

'I mean,' replied the Monsignor, tapping the desk with a finger, 'I mean that you may not have to marry this girl after all.'

John turned astounded eyes on his uncle. 'Will you believe me when I say that I had long intended marrying her, with or without the sin?'

The Monsignor smiled again. It was evident that some of the sadness had left him.

'That may well be, my dear nephew,' he said. 'However, forgive me for pointing it out to you, it is strange, is it not, that you have not married her already? What has kept you from doing so?'

'I wanted my parents to agree.'

'And of course they have not.'

'No.'

'I do not think that they ever will.'

'It is immaterial to me now, whether they do or not. I intend marrying her as soon as it is practicable.'

'You might find that a trifle difficult.'

'I shouldn't think so. People get married every day.'

'Ah yes. And many live to regret it afterwards.'

'That is beside the point. You're simply equivocating, uncle,—and being terribly platitudinous.'

'I'm sorry.' The Monsignor rose. He was now smiling more broadly than ever. John looked at him and he knew that the worst was over. He recognized his uncle again. He almost sighed aloud with relief.

'Forbear with me, John,' the Monsignor said. 'I feel certain that in your heart of hearts you are appreciative of those motives which have led me to put obstacles in your way of thinking over this matter. You do, don't you?'

'I understand, of course.' Then he almost laughed aloud. 'If there was ever a stickler for the old family name, by God, you are the one, uncle! On the other hand, I wish you could be equally appreciative of the fact that I love this girl more than I've ever loved anyone else. She means the world to me. And I shan't be happy until I make her my wife.'

The Monsignor nodded.

'It is all in the order of nature,' he said. 'That is why I understand fully what your position is.' The smile disappeared from his face, and the mournful look came back to him. 'I find myself in a most unenviable situation,' he added. 'On one hand, there is my Church which is against any sort of class

distinction which might prove deleterious to the brethren at large; on the other hand, I feel the Family present in me. A most difficult situation to find oneself in! That is why I have asked you to forbear with me, John, to be patient, and not to judge me too harshly.'

'Well?' asked John.

'Well. I am ready to do everything possible to help—within reason, of course. However, there are one or two things that we must take into account. First, your parents . . .'

'I told you . . .' began John.

'I know. And they object. Your mother more than your father, I should imagine. And then, there is the question of the girl's parents . . .'

'There's only her father.'

'Oh?'

'He's ill in hospital.'

'That is most distressing . . . And do you think he holds any objections?'

'Not valid ones.'

'You sound so uncertain, and so impetuous, John. Some fathers, especially invalid ones, are extremely possessive of their daughters. And she is his only child?'

'Yes.'

'Let us suppose that he raises objections, valid objections, to your union with his daughter, what then?'

'Lucia and I will do our best to ignore them,' John replied grimly.

'I see. As I said, it is a very delicate situation. Well,'—he took John's hand and smiled at him—'God be with you. True love must run its course, they say. We shall see.'

After his nephew had left, the Monsignor had a mental vision of himself rubbing his hands with a certain amount of pride. But this vision was almost immediately superimposed by another—in which he saw his nephew as a child and then as a boy.

This second vision seemed to afflict him strangely. For John as a child and then as a boy was one of his favourite memories.

That afternoon, he had his tea with an air of dejection and the sure knowledge that he need not have appeared all that ignorant about the girl's family history—he had garnered all the information he had wished in this respect long before now. He could have been less ingenuous with John . . .!

It was the thrill of the deception, he thought, that carried me away!

And he thought again of John as a child and as a boy. But even this could not make him forget the flash of inspiration that had come to him.

It was the brightest flash he had had for a long time.

And it concerned a man who lay in hospital dying of an incurable disease.

CHAPTER XXVIII

I

There was an air of freshness and neatness about the grounds, as if here, in this place of broken bodies, racked minds and fear, the human hand had endeavoured to fashion out of stone and soil and plants an ordered image of wholesomeness and serenity. Here, it seemed, pain and fear projected themselves and dispersed among sweet-smelling oleanders, neat-lined flower-beds bursting with colour, the scintillating spray of artistic fountains, and paths from which a leaf was swept away the moment it fell. . . .

Strange, reflected the Monsignor, strange that these thoughts should come to me. He felt strangely elated.

That is how it will all be, he thought: this dreadful business over which the hearts of many are sorely troubled will one day resolve itself in serenity, equanimity and peace. A time will come when conflict will end and peace of mind will once again descend on everyone concerned. John will be his own self again; and so will the girl. My brother and sister-in-law will revert to their customary placidity of life and purpose, from which they have been rudely awakened. The Family name will shine as brilliantly as ever, whole and unsullied. As for himself—well, he had to admit a certain amount of jadedness. After the first flush of excitement—a good diplomat is always excited at every new challenge—there had come to him the hard and slightly uncomfortable feeling of having to continue with a task in which he believed with all his heart, but which he would rather see completed as soon as possible!

It was in this mixed mood of enthusiasm and disgust that the Monsignor walked through the tidy and flower-scented grounds of the hospital.

To the nurse on duty he explained the reason for his visit. 'So you think that it would be possible for me to see the Chaplain,' he said.

'Indeed yes, Monsignor,' she replied. 'I will call him right away.'

She disappeared into her office, and from the waiting-room where he stood, he could hear her lift the telephone receiver and ask for the man he had come to see.

The more he thought of his new plan, the more he liked it. But unaccountably he felt a little sad, too. Confound the place, he said to himself, it has laid its spell on me!

For he knew that in the business with which he was concerned, sentiment could prove a serious stumbling block. Like thinking of John as a child and boy for instance. . . .

He shrugged his shoulders, straightened them, and with hands clasped behind him, awaited the arrival of the Hospital Chaplain.

The latter was not long in coming. He approached the Monsignor hurriedly and with one hand outstretched. The Monsignor took the hand extended to him and allowed the Chaplain to kiss his hand.

'This is a great honour, Monsignor,' intoned the Chaplain. He wore the long, voluminous habit of his Order. From his face grew a beard of the deepest black with only one or two streaks of grey in it. His feet were sandalled.

The Monsignor took his arm.

'Where would you suggest we could talk in private, Friar?' he asked.

The Chaplain instantly turned his large, luminous eyes on him.

'In private?' he repeated. 'In my room, of course. We shall be in absolute privacy there. Come, Monsignor, I will show you the way.'

The Chaplain's room was small and the only window in it overlooked the main courtyard of the hospital. On the windowsill was a metal cage with a canary in it. The bird was silent.

The Friar offered the Monsignor a chair and took one for himself. For a time they remained looking at each other without speaking.

The Monsignor studied curiously the ascetic face before him.

He had never before seen such beautiful eyes in so dry and shapeless a face.

'I trust I have your full confidence, Friar,' he said.

The Friar clasped both hands together and bowed his head.

'To the full, Monsignor,' he said in a whisper. 'I give you my assurance.'

The Monsignor fidgeted slightly in his chair. The air was still, and the room too small, too close.

'I gather that you have here a certain Toni Zarb,' he began.

'Toni Zarb.' The Friar seemed to turn the name over in his mind. 'Ah, yes,' he said at last. 'Old Toni.' And he smiled.

'Why do you smile?' inquired the Monsignor.

The Friar made an apologetic gesture.

'I smile, Monsignor,' he said, 'because of Toni.'

'What about him?'

'He is the queerest fellow. This Toni, he is more—how shall I describe him?—he is more than the nurses and the doctors can cope with. They suffer so, poor souls, because of him! But he is extremely likeable. That is why I smile. Apart from that, he is a Labourite to the backbone.' His voice trailed off in the manner of a man who suddenly remembers that he is talking out of turn. 'Forgive me, Monsignor,' he said, 'you were saying . . .'

The Monsignor moved in his chair again. He felt slightly irritable. He began to have doubts about this Friar. Was he to be depended upon to handle the situation firmly? He looked too volatile, too easily given to smiles, and obviously of a reminiscent turn of mind. This affair required a sure hand, a sense of the practical.

He decided to come straight to the point. To procrastinate was to strengthen his uncertainty over the Friar. 'This Toni Zarb,' he said, 'has a daughter. At the present moment, she is living on her own, as her father is her only relative. And we have strong reasons to believe that she is in great moral danger.'

It was with an inward chuckle of deep satisfaction that he noticed the other man's reaction. At his words, the Friar's

eyes had blinked rapidly and then remained fixed on him. His brow creased and his face, above the beard, paled. The Monsignor knew that he need have no fear of failure from now on. Here, before him, sat a Champion of Morality, if ever there was one. . . .

'In great moral danger, you say, Monsignor?' said the Friar in a hushed tone.

'Indeed, yes. We are extremely worried about her. She has apparently cultivated an attachment with a certain young man. You are aware as much as I am, Friar, what such a situation might lead to unless proper precautions are taken.'

The Friar nodded his head slowly, his eyes fixed unblinkingly on the Monsignor.

'I fully agree,' he said. 'Is there nothing we can do to help this unfortunate woman?'

The Monsignor looked away from the Friar's face with almost a feeling of nausea. The man was so callow, so naïve, so dedicated! He felt that he was witnessing the man's soul stripped bare. He shuddered: why must such people make their goodness and sincerity so obvious? It was repulsive, almost obscene!

He looked at the caged canary and felt relief from the Friar's intense eyes. He said: 'I have arrived at the conclusion that there is only one remedy open to us. And this is, my good Friar, that you instantly bring your influence to bear on her father to have his daughter put away in a proper institution; until, of course, such time as he leaves this hospital a cured man, capable of resuming his fatherly duties.'

'The man is incurable, the doctors tell me,' said the Friar.

The Monsignor sighed and said nothing.

The Friar rose, and, with clasped hands, walked to the window and looked down into the quadrangle.

The Monsignor looked at his back, as he stood framed in the oblong of light. He knew that the Friar was praying. He waited patiently. He must have this man's viewpoint in its entirety before he dare leave.

The Friar turned slowly from the window. 'You talk about

an institution,' he said. 'What institution have you in mind, Monsignor?'

'Well, as far as I know, there is only one *such* institution,' replied the prelate. 'It is there that she should be sent.'

'With your permission, Monsignor,' said the Friar with a disquieted air, 'may I please point out that that institution is only for . . . a certain kind of woman.'

'You mean fallen women.'

'That is so. While the woman we are discussing . . .

'She is fallen.' The Monsignor rose with a faint air of irritation. 'That is,' he continued, 'she has transgressed with the young man in question—at least, once.' He waited for the Friar to understand fully what he had just said. 'You realize now, do you not, the gravity of the situation?'

'Yes, Monsignor. It is very sad.'

'And I hope you realize, too, the duty that lies before you. You must impress on the father the necessity of having his daughter satisfactorily safeguarded. Open his eyes to the grave dangers that beset her. He should have no excuse as she is not yet twenty-one. I repeat, it is his duty to see his daughter removed from all further temptations and ensconced in the safety and sanctity of the Institute of the Good Samaritan.'

The Friar nodded his head, in his eyes the flame of dedication.

The Monsignor prepared to leave. He took the Friar's hand. He said: 'Keep me informed, Friar.'

The canary twittered, breaking his long silence. The Monsignor turned at the sound that now rose trillingly, filling the room.

'His song does him credit,' he said with a smile. Then he left the room with the Friar.

2

The Friar found Toni lying on his back and declaiming for the benefit of the ward that his mother had had eleven children to bring up and had slaved for them till she dropped dead in the potato patch she worked for a well-to-do farmer.

'And when she died, if it hadn't been for a neighbour there'd have been just a shroud for her and not a sign of a box . . . And there was just one priest, and you'd have thought there'd be more. And he buried my mother as if there was a pack of dogs after his tail. I never seen a one like him for praying fast . . .' He turned his head and saw the Friar.^o

'Hello, Friar,' he said, noticing that a screen was being put round the bed. 'Come to hear my sins?'

The Friar's look was reproachful.

'You know, Toni,' he said quietly, 'You really shouldn't say such things. Remember that some of these patients are still very young and impressionable.'

'They're never too young to learn,' said Toni, his smile bringing out the gaunt edges of his bones under his yellow skin. 'Sit down, Friar, sit down.'

The Friar sat rigid in the chair, not knowing how to begin.

'You're a queer one,' said Toni seriously. 'But you're a man after my own heart. I bet you wouldn't have hurried with your prayers over my mother.'

'I don't know, I don't know what I would have done,' rejoined the Friar in a tired voice. 'We humans are so full of little failings, and none is an exception.'

'Not you,' said Toni quickly. 'I know a good man when I see one. Damned if I don't! . . . I'll tell you something, Friar. Once I swore for a whole day because the wine-cask in the cellar cracked and I lost nearly all the wine. All in one night. Well, afterwards I was sorry I swore and went to church. There was a . . .'

'I would rather you didn't go on,' the Friar interposed in faint alarm. 'Perhaps another day, eh? You see, I have a matter of grave import to discuss with you and no time must be lost.'

'Very well,' said Toni sulkily. 'But I'll tell you that story one day, God help me, I will.'

But Toni never did finish his story, that day or any other, for what the Friar told him took his mind off everything else, including his politics.

At first he was wild with the Friar. No one was going to tell him such things about Lucia! Lucia was a child, so pure . . . But then he looked at the Friar and saw how good he was, and he remembered how Lucia had changed into a woman, and a woman stopped being a child and stopped being pure . . .

He cursed⁴ his fate and hated his daughter. Then he loved her again, loved her so much that he burst out crying and held the Friar's hands to his wet face.

'I could kill him with my bare hands,' he sobbed.

'That would not help your daughter,' the Friar said. 'It is of her that you must think now.'

'I warned her against him from the start. He's like the rest of them—blood-suckers and rapers . . .'

'Hush, Toni, you must not talk like this. Control yourself.'

But Toni could not control himself at first. He held on to the Friar's hands as if his life depended upon it, and when some of the other patients shouted to him to shut up and hurled other abuse at him, he did not seem to mind; he ignored them.

Exhaustion came to his aid. He lay back on the pillow and numbly watched the doctor putting the syringe needle into his arm and heard him talk a little crossly to the Friar.

'It's not his fault,' he said weakly. 'He's a good man. Let him be.' And when he saw that the Friar had risen to his feet, he turned again to the doctor. 'Let him be,' he shouted. 'Let him be, damn you! I . . . I promise to behave.'

When the doctor left, he motioned to the Friar to sit again.

'Well, Friar,' he said. 'He didn't take you away from me—him and his needle! Why doesn't he go and stick it in his grandma's backside? Fat lot of good it's doing me. Can't they see that I've got to die? Why don't they leave me alone?'

'Please Toni, for my sake, control yourself,' said the Friar hoarsely, his face glistening with sweat, and his eyes, too . . .

'I'm . . . I'm all right. But I want to know what we're going to do about her. We can't let her go on sleeping around!'

The Friar closed his eyes. When he opened them again, he said: 'I was coming to that. With you incapacitated and no

one to look after her properly, I suggest that the best solution is to send her for a time to a charitable institution where she could be well looked after and where she could atone for her sin in an atmosphere of piety and peace. What do you say?’

Toni could say nothing much. The injection had produced a drowsy effect in him and he heard the Friar’s voice as if from a world away. But he understood.

‘It would be the best thing for her,’ he said, his lips hardly moving. ‘And I hope she’ll have his bastard. That would teach her what to expect from the likes of him!’

When finally he closed his eyes to sleep, the tears kept coming for a while. They crept along the deep lines on his face and slid into his hollow cheeks.

The Friar made as if to wipe them off, but then he hesitated. Instead he formed the Sign of the Cross over the sleeping man’s chest.

This done, he walked heavily out of the ward, went to the Matron’s office and rang up the Monsignor.

CHAPTER XXIX

Lucia had got up feeling well that morning. She tidied the house and made out a shopping list. When she went to a pocket of her 'short coat for a key, she found a sprig of pheasant's eye, wilted and faded.

She smiled to herself, remembering how the day before, while they rested between two large rocks on top of the steep side of the Chadwick Lakes, where they had spent the best part of the day, John had picked a handful of wild flowers and thrown them into her lap. Among them was a sprig of pheasant's eye. She had seen it and immediately picked it up with an exclamation of joy.

'Beautiful,' John had said.

She had looked from the flower to him. His face was set and a little pale. She was instantly filled with concern and was on the point of dropping the flower back with the others. But he held her hand. 'No,' he said, 'hold it like this. It was a passing thought. When I picked it, I said to myself: "It is tinier than the others, but the most extraordinary. I want to see if she notices its beauty, too. If she does, then I am a very fortunate man." You see, it was just a little game I played with myself. I was ready to discount it if you had chosen any other of these flowers.'

She thought now of his strong arms around her after he had spoken these words. She had kept the flower. Now it was wilted and faded but, to her, it still held in it the marvel of his game and the certainty of his emotions.

She put the pheasant's eye back in the pocket of her coat and went to answer the baker's knock.

With one hand she held the door, and with the other took the bread from the boy. She stood like this, even after the boy had left, sensing Sa Matress even before she saw her.

The woman was walking along the opposite pavement. She was dressed in black; her head was covered with a shawl that

fell in tattered lace as far down as her waist. Her shoes slapped the grey pavement as she walked, each step disclosing the torn heels of her coarse, black stockings.

She turned her head slightly to look at Lucia. Her eyes were sunken deep in a face that, suddenly, startlingly, reminded Lucia of Dun Saver as he had been just before the end.

The hatred in the woman's eyes was clear, incisively visible. Lucia felt it run through her, and a coldness inside her. Even after Sa Matress had turned the corner, she could still feel the eyes and the horror that was in them, projected now into the deepest parts of her body.

She closed the door and hurried into the house. She put the bread away and sank into a chair, shaking uncontrollably. She covered her face with her hands, fighting against nausea and the rising wish to scream.

The next moment she was sick. All her body shook. She was sick for a long time; the bouts were sharp and insistent. Tears came to her eyes even though she was not consciously crying.

Somehow, in the long run, the tears were a relief and, when the sickness had passed, her breath came fast; but even this was a relief after the hard, rasping agony of her retching.

Mechanically she poured out a cup of black coffee and drained it. But, though she began to feel better, she knew that she could not hope for much of the day that had given her this new, strange experience. Sa Matress and the sickness were the day's set-piece—she knew it. And, strangely, while she yearned for John in this moment of terror, she could not bear the thought of his touch, or even his nearness. Wanting him, she dreaded him.

As the time passed, however, and the stillness of the house resolved the tumult within her, she felt shame at her moment's aversion to him. She whispered his name as if to reassure herself and felt rested and thankful. But she prayed she would never feel unwell like that again. She felt she would never be able to bear a recurrence. It was like dying a little.

When she reached the hospital, after her shopping was done, she went to her father with a smile on her lips. He lay

so still that for a second she thought he was asleep. She felt a little disappointed. She bent over him.

'Father,' she said. 'Are you not feeling well?'

He opened his eyes instantly and stared at her. 'As well as can be in the circumstances,' he said, and his eyes went over her curiously. He took her hand and held it. 'Child,' he said, 'What have you done? What have you done?'

In the same breath, he called for the nurse and, when the nurse hurried in, he asked for a screen to be put round his bed.

Then he asked again: 'What have you done?'

Lucia caught her breath and her body went rigid. 'What have I done, father?' she said in a whisper.

He spoke with considerable effort, his face contorted.

'Done, Lucia,' he said. 'Done! Do you know, child, that were I strong enough to do it, I could kill you with my bare hands, here and now. It is the feeling I have now, my dearest. I could kill you for what you've done!'

CHAPTER XXX

The Monsignor preferred to do his most important work in his study. For inspiration and intimacy of thought with thought, there is nothing better than your own special room in the house you have inhabited for so long. To the Monsignor, his room had meant the arena in which some of his most successful plans had been laid and executed. To that room had come people from all walks of life, with all sorts of problems, begging for his counsel and aid, and in that room he had given his help and advice many times over.

Of course, there were the exceptions: there were times, fortunately very few and far between, when even the most carefully laid plans had been unsuccessful. They were a disappointment; but he was justifiably proud of the fact that he had never, never discarded half-way any plan which, once initiated, he would rather give up his career and retire from his ministry than reject altogether.

This little matter of his nephew, for instance, had required careful attention. It had nearly misfired once or twice. There had been moments of frustration at the way the plan was proceeding, but one way or another he had managed to keep control. It was nothing less than sheer doggedness of purpose. . . .

Now for the first time since the regrettable affair had started, he felt he was really and truly succeeding. He felt it in him, and it was a good feeling. It made him strangely restless and keener than ever to carry on with the task.

It also made him mildly surprised to realize that he could no longer bear to remain in his well-loved room, when the matter could be dealt with more expeditiously in the world outside. He knew how that it had been the certainty of success that had made him leave his house that day and go to the hospital. He had felt success so precious and desirable that he had even doubted the wisdom of calling the Hospital Chaplain to his house instead of himself going to the Chaplain. For the

first time in his life, the Monsignor, used to having mountains come to him, had elected to go to the mountain.

From that moment, the deep significance his room had always held for him began to fade.

He felt like a General who, as long as the fortunes of battle remain doubtful, stays on at Headquarters, but as soon as success is imminent sets forth to be 'in at the kill'.

It was for this reason that instead of using the telephone on his desk or calling the Chaplain to him in person, he set off again to the hospital.

Not that he was extraordinarily elated. The latest message from the Friar had been to the effect that, despite all her father's entreaties and menaces, the girl had utterly refused to enter the Institute of the Good Samaritan.

When he at last found himself face to face with the good Friar, the latter looked distinctly perturbed.

'It was a most unbecoming scene, Monsignor,' the Friar explained. 'And so pathetic, too! The poor girl wept and said that she would rather die than go to the Institute. Then she rushed out of the hospital. I fear that what her father has not succeeded in doing today, he will not succeed in doing any other day. Satan is so powerful!' He looked up expectantly. 'Perhaps her own Father Confessor . . .' he began.

The Monsignor cut him short.

'That, too, would be unavailing.'

The Friar hung his head sadly. 'Another soul is on its headlong way to eternal 'perdition,' he said quietly. 'Unless a miracle happens . . .'

'A miracle is not required.'

'Not required?'

'I have been thinking. Satan might yet be beaten, my good Friar. I have thought of another way by which this unfortunate, wayward maiden might be brought back to the path of righteousness and virtue.'

'Another plan, Monsignor?' asked the Friar with awe.

'It is a plan,' said the Monsignor, tapping with a finger the bars of the canary's cage, 'that with delicacy of feeling and

the right approach would bring the matter to the desired end. It is quite simple really. As the girl has refused her consent, she must be forced to give it.'

'Forced?'

'It is not so drastic as it might at first appear. As you are aware, the girl is still under age. In other words, what her father could not achieve by his own authority, he can achieve by the authority of the Law.'

The Friar clasped his hands. 'Law?' he repeated.

The Monsignor turned from the window and looked at the Friar. 'Friar,' he said calmly, 'it is your duty now to convince her father that, in order to save his daughter from sin, he must apply forthwith for a Court Order. . . . I realize this may appear a little drastic but one cannot afford to deal lightly with the Devil and his ways.'

The Friar sat down slowly. His hands were still clasped together, and his eyes never left the Monsignor's face.

'Satan may yet be vanquished,' he said, his lips hardly moving.

'Yes,' said the Monsignor, 'that is a heartening consideration.'

CHAPTER XXXI

The sea was a wide, shimmering stretch, extending to the distant sun-wrought haze. Here, where they lay, with the soft, turquoise mouth of the Blue Grotto behind them and the short, terraced fields above them, they were conscious of the separation of two worlds: one treacherous and cold, the other peaceful and still, like the rounded projection of the water on the sand.

It was here, with the mysterious and enchanted sounds of the Grotto increasing her wonder and delicious apathy, that Lucia was finding time to be still and be content—for the first time in a week. Her eyes were closed and she breathed calmly. . . .

After her visit to her father, she had rushed out of the hospital, not knowing where she was going. And as she ran and waited impatiently for the bus that was to take her back to Valletta, she felt she was not running and waiting alone. It was as if an unseen presence had followed her out of the building and meant to keep up with her. Whatever it was, she knew it was frightening and indecent.

Wanting to free herself of this presence she had gone to John's flat instead of returning home. When he opened the door in answer to her ring, she wept and was thankful for his arms that held her from falling. With his arm round her, he led her in, closed the door and helped her to lie on the bed. She wept for a long time.

John's face was white but, seeing her unable to speak, he did not speak either. He gave her a drink and then, slowly, the fit left her, and she told him the whole story. She said it like one who feels instinctively that his listener cannot really understand everything that is told him.

'But how did he come to know about that night?' he asked her.

'I do not know,' she replied. 'But he knows. Is it not enough that he knows?'

His concern turned to anger. His face twisted and he clenched his fists.

'He can't do it,' he exclaimed. 'He can't take you away from me!' He paused before adding: 'There is someone! It is not just my father, or my mother, or anybody like that whom we know about. But there is someone!'

He was bending over her, his eyes searching hers with an intensity of bewilderment and anger. She turned her face away, knowing that what she suspected must for ever remain locked in her heart, that but to reveal what she knew would mean greater peril for them both, even disaster.

She must never speak these thoughts aloud. John must never know! That day in the damasked room with the gorgeous tapestry on the wall and the priest with the courteous manners and the burning fanaticism when he spoke of his Family in his eyes was a day she had consciously buried in an unknown corner of her being. No one and nothing would ever make her exhume it. That day was dead, and dead it must remain—dead with Dun Saver, dead with her virginity, dead always.

She turned to John impulsively and said: 'Let me stop here with you.' She pressed her face to his and closed her eyes, her lips searching for his. 'Let me stay. I dare not return. I don't know what might happen if I were alone and away from you. I am afraid.'

For answer, he held her close to him, and they lay still without speaking. Silently, they shared thoughts of fear and of nearness . . .

At last she rose and walked to the window, wanting to hide from him the warmth on her face.

She said without turning round: 'I must have been mad to suggest such a thing.'

'Nonsense,' he said. He spoke suddenly, thickly. 'I'm not going to let you leave this flat again, Lucia. It would be most unwise for you to return to the house. Here, you're safe with me. You'll never be alone again—and frightened.'

She stayed on at the flat. He had gone to the house with her

and helped her pack some of her more essential belongings. He gave her the use of his bedroom, rigging up a bed for himself in the sitting-room. She hardly left the flat at all. He discharged his housekeeper and did most of the shopping himself, usually in the evenings, after work.

When he was at the office, she busied herself tidying the flat and cooking. Most of the time, she moved about as if in a trance. It was almost unbelievable, this happiness, a happiness so great that it saved her from troubling too much over her position.

In the evening, they stayed up late on the terrace and looked down at the moving harbour-lights. These were moments they both cherished, even when she tried to hint at the impossibility of their position, the stark helplessness. . . . But they were together, that was the important thing. When they parted for the night, the harbour was usually still and the hum of the city no more than a memory. They kissed silently. When John called the last 'goodnight' from the other room, she returned the word and smiled up at the low ceiling that flickered with reflection of ship-lights. The moving mesh it formed increased her sense of security. . . .

In the mornings, she woke up early, before John was astir. When sickness overpowered her, she tried to be as noiseless as possible. She held grimly to the wall and prayed. 'Oh God, don't let me faint! Don't let him know!' The sweat lay like a layer of ice across her forehead and on the back of her neck; and she had to grit her teeth not to fall. At last the paroxysm passed and she dressed slowly. When finally she knocked on John's door, breakfast was on the table waiting for him. . . .

This visit to the Blue Grotto they had planned with great excitement. They would spend a whole day there. They would return home refreshed. . . .

The water was the clearest here, and the most beautiful. They had swum and skylarked on the sand and among shapes of rocks that looked, in the sun, like diamonds of giants. They entered the cave and watched fascinated the water's change in hue. He held her hand tightly in his as they crept along the

narrow ledges. In one part, the ultramarine was so thick that they felt they were living in a world of silent sea. They looked at each other through the deep blueness that surrounded them, and their kiss had its tang and its colour.

'One would gladly die in a sea like this,' she whispered. 'We two, together, beloved . . .'

Until finally, exhausted, they lay down on the sand. It was the hour of the greatest heat, and they sat in the shade, their eyes on the sea.

'We shall be together,' he said. 'And I shall wait until you are free of your father. This coming-of-age is the most damnable thing—but I shall wait, my darling. We shall wait together, and near each other, until the waiting, however glorious, comes to an end and we have each other!'

It was time to leave and he tugged her hand playfully. But she made no move to rise. He noticed her face, drained of colour.

'It is nothing,' she said. 'I felt a little faint just now. See, it has passed.' She forced a smile. 'It is the excitement,' she added. 'And the fresh air. I have been too long indoors and now, all of a sudden . . . all . . . all this wonderful air and sea. It is nothing.'

She rose to her feet and leaned against him. 'It is so good to be with you,' she said. 'So, so good!'

How light she was, and beautiful! Just like an angel, but infinitely more beautiful! A heady sensation of love filled him and he held her close to him.

It is to this that my life is dedicated, he thought, and if God is good, He will help me to keep her; without her, life would be meaningless. I would rather die than lose her!

The journey back to town was leisurely. The bus was only half full and they sat together. They thought and spoke of the Grotto and its brilliance that made one wish to die and of the sand that was as pleasant as journey's end. . . .

When they reached the flat, a police constable emerged from the gloom of the landing. In his hand he held an envelope. He touched his cap when he saw them.

'Excuse me, sir,' he said to John. 'Is the lady's name Miss Lucia Zarb?'

'Yes,' replied John.

'I have something here for her.' The constable smiled. 'We've been looking everywhere for you, ma'am.' And he handed her the envelope.

She took it and opened it slowly. As she did so John caught sight of the embossed coat-of-arms—lion and unicorn—and the black, typed letterhead at the top. Instantly he knew that the unseen, unknown enemy had caught up with them again.

Only, this time, he was aided and abetted by the power of law and protocol, mightier than the ages.

Even though a little less wise.

CHAPTER XXXII

I

The day John returned to his father's Villa after a long absence was the day when the Count had finally decided that life at home without John was not in the least worth living.

He had struggled long and persistently against this thought, and that morning he had woken up resolved to tackle his cigar-bands again to see whether they could help him to forget his sense of hopelessness and replace his loss of direction.

He had gone to them with excitement, eager to prove again their worth in his life. But he had barely opened the first volume when the hopelessness of his position struck him again, even more acutely. He looked at the colourful entries with astonishment; astonishment at the apparent insignificance and barrenness of something which for years had ruled his whole life.

He closed the volume violently and put it back with the others. He would never again have anything to do with cigar-bands as long as he lived! He was certain of that, as certain as he was that, without John, life had lost its meaning for him.

It was as though he felt the imperative necessity of obliterating from his heart and mind those long years in which he had neglected his son. And yet he felt powerless to do this. For now, he reflected, it was too late, and feelings which a parent might show to a child were absolutely out of the question when that child was now a grown-up, a man in love, a man who was virtually a parent himself!

You do not fuss over a grown-up man; you do not go to him and say: 'Son, I worship the ground you walk on. I have neglected you, I admit, but now I am going to make up for it. I shall spoil you, my son, I shall have you near me all the time. I shall give you everything you wish. Son, I shall be everything to you. If you will let me!'

It was painful for him to think these thoughts. If only he were made differently! He knew fathers who gushed over their grown-up children unashamedly. He envied them. With him, however, it was out of the question!

That's why he was tired of life.

There was the question of his grandson. The thought had excited him more than his cigar-bands had ever done in the old days. But there had been set-backs, right from the start. He had to face facts: his brother had always won in the end and what he said invariably came about! 'They will not marry,' his brother had said. And, because of what his brother had said, he knew that, if there were a grandson, he would never bear his name. His brother would see to that! His brother had a head on his shoulders!

And what use was a grandson if he could not have his grandfather's name!

At the back of his mind, he knew he had given in too easily to his brother. He should have persisted, told Assalon straight away that John was his son, and any children of his son's were more his responsibility than his brother's. He should have said to him: 'Brother, I shall brook no interference from you. I warn you most solemnly—do not interfere!' That's what he should have told his brother—and nearly the same thing to Ermeline. He should have fought tooth and nail for a name for his grandson; not given in so easily!

But that day he had not known how indecisive, how appallingly weak he was. It had needed the shock outside John's flat, when he thought he was going to die and could hardly get his breath back, to make him realize that he was completely unsuited to meet, boldly any challenge of life—even if it meant a name for his grandson, and John home again, and a new peace, and everything back in its proper place. . . .

And death!

The morning was fine, and he could hear Ermeline talking to one of the maids. He could not catch the words. It did not matter. . . .

The pagoda gleamed brightly in the sun and the gardener

was making a heap of weeds in one corner of it. But everything seemed to be without outline—strange!

He thought of the Host which he had taken that morning, and wondered whether It had any power to prevent him from dying when he wanted to die. . . .

He saw Ermeline walking over to speak to the gardener. Ermeline was a stranger. He could not remember ever marrying her, or her bearing his children, or even ever meeting her. She was a stranger in his house, this Ermeline; a stranger with a presence in the rooms, passing him by on the stairs, at the dinner-table speaking one or two words he could not understand and he not bothering to ask her to repeat them. . . .

The gardener was back at his work. Cut . . . pull . . . snip . . . Weeds to be cut or pulled out, and thrown on the heap in the pagoda without outline or shape. Weeds pulled up from the roots . . . Make sure they leave no bits to germinate. That would be bad, very bad! Cut . . . pull . . . snip . . . There! The roots coming clean out, whole and unbroken, leaving only a tiny, empty hole in the damp soil. In a minute or two, the hole would fill up again; the soil would slide down; unwittingly, the gardener would tread on the hole with his heavy, big boots, pressing the soil in. No hole now, but more seeds, seeds of weeds. . . .

So it goes on! Worthless weeds, unnecessary and unwanted. Useless. No place for them in the great Scheme, surely. So pull them out!

John!

He would have liked to see him, just for a minute, no more, before he died.

John!

How had he begotten him? Surely, this stranger below, the stranger picking the flowers with slow, deliberate movements of her white, beautiful hands had not been a stranger then! Or had she? Or he to her? He did not know. Things had no more outline or shape. Things can be too difficult to see. . . .

The house was empty of sound. Only an echo, perhaps, of

John's rumbustious entrances and exits. John with the school-satchel or the tennis-rackets. John with the eager look. John looking so well and healthy in that awful uniform. Glad John was not wearing *that* any more. Best thing that could have happened.

If he lived ~~he~~ he would see that his grandson never had to wear *that*.

If ~~he~~ lived! There he went again · supposing and never doing. For he was going to die.

He crept on tip-toe to the other end of the room and opened a drawer. The pistol gleamed newly in its velvet-lined case. Such a small thing . . . some sort of heirloom, he could not remember exactly. It contained one bullet. That bullet had always been there. In case, his father used to say . . . in case of what? Burglars, probably. But you do not shoot burglars nowadays—an uncivilized practice. One just creeps silently to the telephone and rings up the police; they do the rest. . . . In case!

Of course, ~~the~~ the moment was now. To delay any further was to lengthen the loneliness, the moments without John, the memory of the nameless grandson.

He hoped the Host would not deflect the bullet. He would never forgive himself if the bullet went wide of the mark. . . . Such a simple thing really! He told the Host that it was because he loved and yet was incapable of love that he was doing this—this simple, extraordinary thing. The Host would understand.

It was there in him, since early that morning. Soon a bullet would join It . . . in case!

When his eyes took in again the scene in the garden, they focused on John talking to his mother. John with shape and outline. . . .

He looked down bemused at the pistol that had fallen from his hand. He sat down on a chair and stared at it. Desperately, he tried to convince himself that it had been the sight of John in the garden that had stopped him from doing the thing; that had it not been ~~for~~ for John, he would be dead now. . . .

It was no use.

He looked up slowly and saw the sky, and he knew that he had changed his decision before he had become aware of John in the garden! He himself had decided to live when all he wanted was to die.

It had nothing to do with John.

He looked about him, his eyes vacant. A shiver of self-reproach passed through him: he had failed again, even in the face of this challenge!

Of course, he would see John now that he was here. The prospect did not fill him with any delight.

How presumptuous, how idiotically presumptuous he had been to suppose, even for one moment, that he could love his son as he had pretended to himself, or care about his grandson, or stand up to his brother and Ermelinde, when he could not even die when this was the thing he most wanted to do!

2

When he got downstairs, the Count had the feeling of an intruder. It came suddenly to him, with almost devastating force. He hesitated. He heard the sound of John's voice and his mother's; and they sounded so strange—voices he had forgotten or had never known. . . . They came to him as if from behind a long wall of separation.

He knew at once that he should be dead on the floor of his room. With a hole in his head. Fate had wanted it like that but he had cheated Fate and Fate had avenged itself by creating this long separation from the people he had known. . . .

They both came towards him when they saw him. He tried to understand. There was this woman's pale, emotionless face and the boy's grim, set expression—masks floating before his vision. Somewhere in his body, a lever was desperately trying to click into a groove that wasn't there. If only it did! That would free him from the dry, hard contemplation of a head with a bullet hole in it. If only it did!

The boy said: 'I mean to get to the bottom of this!' Surely,

he should try to lower his voice—that was no way to speak. To the bottom of what?

He looked at his wife. She stood motionless, her eyes on the boy, in them an expression so vacant that he almost felt a moment's sympathy. 'I do not understand,' he said slowly.

The boy turned to him with an abrupt movement of his whole body and the look in his eyes confirmed to the Count the rift that had suddenly opened wide between him and these people since he had let the gun slip through his nerveless fingers.

'You do, quite well,' the boy was saying. 'And mother. She won't speak, and that's proof of her guilt!'

'Her guilt!' repeated the Count. He wished he could forget for a minute the corpse upstairs. It was so difficult to concentrate on what the boy was saying!

He sighed with relief when his wife spoke. She said: 'The guilt is neither mine nor your father's. This is a punishment you and the girl incurred when you acted against all rules of behaviour.'

What on earth did the woman mean by that? He must find out. He must try, try as hard as he could, to forget that death-face on the carpet with the red lines.

He straightened his back and the haze cleared a little.

'Has someone punished John?' he asked.

'It is like this, Thomas.' He was glad and grateful to her for answering his question so quickly. 'John has got this girl into trouble and she has been taken away to an Institute, presumably on her father's orders. Do you not understand now?'

He could have smiled. But of course he understood! 'It is perfectly natural that this should happen,' he said.

'You confirm your own guilt by speaking like that, father,' the boy said.

Confound the boy! Why must he shout like that? He had said nothing to annoy him—he was sure of that. All he had done was to agree with the woman. She had spoken and looked as if she expected him to agree with her. What harm was there in that? Why must the boy shout?

'Why must you shout?' he was going to say, but he did not say it for he was looking at the boy's back making for the door. He felt his body stiffen. He would not have that! There were so many things . . . so many things. . . . For instance, there was that head upstairs with a bullet hole in it. He wondered what the boy would make of it.

'You must stay,' he called to the boy. 'You must not leave.'

The boy stopped near the door and turned round.

'I would rather stay with a nest of vipers,' the boy said.

Now he was shouting again! He was making things so difficult.

'But why?' the Count said.

'Bring her back to me and I shall stop believing that you had any hand in it.'

The Count felt joy surging through him. He stepped forward and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder. 'My dear boy,' he said, 'it is not impossible to do that. Of course, I shall bring her back to you, just as you said. I have influence, have I not, Ermelinde?'

'John,' she said, 'you had better go.'

Confound the woman, he thought, what does she think she is doing? She cannot send him away! Not now when the anger seems to have left the boy and it seems a good moment to tell the boy about the thing upstairs!

'You must not go yet,' he said. 'We must talk further.' He lowered his voice. 'Besides, I have something I must show you. In my room, upstairs. It is the most extraordinary thing that has ever happened. Please, do not go.'

The boy's next words were inexplicable. 'Don't worry, father,' the boy said. 'I'm sure it's not your fault. Please forgive me for blaming you.'

Then he was gone, and he was running after him, calling him back. 'Do not go. Do not go just yet. Everything can be arranged. Besides, I am sure you have never seen anything like what I have upstairs. Do not go.'

The door shut, and for a moment he stood looking at it, expecting it to open again.

He turned and saw his wife. He said: 'Why did he have to go just when everything was becoming so interesting?'

He let her take him by the arm and lead him into the lounge.

'I have influence,' he told her. 'And I feel certain that I can help him. You should not have sent him away. That was a cruel thing to do. Besides, he will never know now.'

She placed her hands on his shoulders and gently pressed him into a chair. He sat, grateful for the support her hands and the chair gave him.

'You know quite well, Thomas,' she said gently, 'that we cannot do anything. It is the law that has to take its course—the law and the prerogative of a father.'

'I have influence,' he protested weakly, trying to turn his head so that he might look at her. The pressure of her hands, however, though gentle, was very firm.

'Influence is illegal when it is directed against the smooth running of the law. You know that, Thomas.'

'I have influence,' he said again.

Later when his brother came, he told him: 'Brother, I have influence. You and I will help the boy. I think something has happened to him; something very awful. Should we not help him, brother?'

The Monsignor smiled at him and patted his hand. 'The boy is in no trouble, Thomas,' he said. 'It is just his way of looking at things. You know how irascible young people are. You need have no worry over him.'

'No,' the Count said quietly, 'I suppose I need not have any worry over him. But I have influence. I do hope he remembers that any time he requires my help. I have influence.'

Saying that, he was conscious of the corpse moving slightly and echoing his words.

CHAPTER XXXIII

The women are dressed in a standard grey, with long, buttoned-up sleeves, skirts reaching well below the knees, and the neck-line close to the throat.

They wear their hair simply, brushed back from the forehead and pinned behind in a bun. No ear-rings or brooches; only a wrist-watch is allowed—on those, at least, who have brought one with them from the world outside, the world they are told to forget.

The watch tells the time and time is important here. It might even mean salvation.

Their legs are stockinged in grey, and their footwear is black, heel-less and noiseless and comfortable.

The walls are high and the garden walls are topped with broken bottles bedded in hard cement. The women's rooms are situated well away from the front. Those in front are occupied by the more elderly nuns, the little nuns with their slow and quiet walk, their wrinkled faces and the colourless lips moving constantly in prayer.

It was one of these that led Lucia to a small, bare room at the end of a long, dark corridor. There she was asked to remove her clothes and don the grey raiment of the Institute.

While she changed, the old nun waited outside in the corridor, and Lucia could hear her mumbling her prayers. After her thin clothes, the garments she had been given felt coarse and heavy against her skin. She had some difficulty doing up the top button and she had in mind to call the nun to do it up for her. But she felt she would rather leave it undone than let the nun touch her, so great was her shame.

At last she was ready—the long, unsightly dress done up right to the neck. As if she had waited longer than was customary on such occasions, the nun appeared in the room without announcing herself. Quietly and unsmilingly she surveyed Lucia, then nodded as if the whole operation met with her approval.

When Lucia began to make a bundle of her clothes, the nun stopped her. 'Leave those,' she said tersely. 'They will be taken care of. Follow me.'

The two walked away in silence through the corridors. The place was so quiet that Lucia felt tempted to ask the nun whether she was the only inmate. At last they stopped opposite a door on which the nun knocked discreetly.

At an order which Lucia failed to hear, the nun opened the door deferentially and, with a hardly perceptible nod of the head, indicated to Lucia that she might enter.

This room was lighted from a window that showed the orange trees in the garden below. It was sparsely furnished. The floor was bare. Sacred portraits hung at ordered intervals on the walls. Two round pillars holding an arch buttressing the ceiling formed a small alcove directly opposite. On the wall of this alcove hung a large Crucifix under which stood a table at which a nun was sitting. She was the Reverend Mother Superior of the Institute.

'Come forward,' she said.

Lucia, awed by her surroundings and feeling uncomfortable in her new clothes, advanced slowly until she stood just below the pillared arch and a few feet away from the desk.

'Nearer,' said Mother Superior.

In the half-gloom, Mother Superior's face appeared thin and lined. Her nose, fine and straight, showed clearly beneath the white head-band of the cowl. Her hands were out of sight.

'Our rules are simple,' she said at once. Her voice was low but clipped, like a voice from a machine. 'You are here not only in atonement for your sins, for which you must pray, but also as a member of a community of similar women who have come here to work and pray in safety, away from the temptations of the flesh. The first rule, therefore, is to pray. The second, to work in a mood of humility. The third, to obey implicitly my orders and those of the nuns to whose direct care I shall delegate you. The fourth, to think only chaste thoughts and to do nothing to further the works of Satan, the Arch-Enemy.'

She paused. Then said: 'Have you understood everything that I have said?'

Lucia nodded.

'Sister Imelda here,' Mother Superior continued, 'will take you to the room you are to occupy from now on. I trust that there you will find the peace and the goodness for which your soul craves.'

She stopped again. Lucia, by some trick of light from the open window, could see her eyes now. She had not expected to find them so large and so unblinking.

'I must warn you,' Mother Superior said, 'that you must entertain no thought of escape from this Institute. Even if you tried, you would find it practically impossible! On the other hand, you must realize that if ever you are caught attempting such a foolish manoeuvre, you would be punished as one who has broken the laws of the land. You are here under a legal injunction. Do I make myself clear?'

Lucia nodded again. She felt a numbness that made the whole situation seem unreal. The nun's monotonous voice, the bad light, Sister Imelda's muttering behind her, filled her with a desire to lie down through sheer mental fatigue and physical lethargy. Her head throbbed.

'Another point before I dismiss you. Tomorrow morning, you will be called to be examined by the Institute's medical officer. I tell you this so that you may be prepared. That is all, Lucia. You may withdraw. Sister Imelda will show you to your room.'

At the mention of her name, Lucia raised her head as if, for the first time during the interview, she had fully awakened.

'Go,' said Mother Superior.

She was smiling. It was so sudden and unexpected that Lucia remained rooted to the spot, unable to move. She would have remained like that, indefinitely, had not Sister Imelda, coming from behind her, touched her arm.

When she turned to go, the smile had disappeared from Mother Superior's face and her expression was as impassive as before.

But as she walked away in Sister Imelda's wake through the silent corridors, Lucia seemed to see still that smile and the eyes that had suddenly appeared beautiful.

It was only when they stopped before an open door that she began to doubt whether that smile had really happened at all.

CHAPTER XXXIV

I

The room they gave Lucia was a fairly large one. The walls were washed in limestone yellow, the floor covered with limestone slabs showing ruts in many places where innumerable feet had passed. The furniture consisted of one work-table, three raffia-seated chairs with straight backs, a large unwieldy wardrobe, three white commodes, a Crucifix on a wall, a large, coloured frame of the Virgin and Child, and three single beds.

A small, barred window overlooked a tiny, rectangular yard with a well and pulley in one corner. This yard led, as Lucia later discovered, to the main garden of the Institute. However, on entering the room for the first time in the company of Sister Imelda, she did not know this. The view of a high, grey wall outside the window gave her an immediate feeling of depression and isolation, and she turned to the nun with the half-formed intention of asking for a better room. A room with a window and a view. . . .

Sister Imelda, however, was engaged in opening the massive wardrobe. She called Lucia to her and said: 'This part of the wardrobe is for your use'—indicating one dark corner in which could be seen a pair of wooden clothes-hangers.

'Whose are these clothes?' asked Lucia, pointing to some garments in other parts of the wardrobe.

'Those clothes,' replied Sister Imelda irritably as if the question was altogether out of place, 'they belong to the others.'

The others turned out to be two women with whom Lucia was to share the room.

One was very young, not more than seventeen. She was remarkably tall for her age, and carried herself well. The moment she set eyes on her, Lucia told herself that she had never before seen such a face on anyone, except perhaps on an angel in a church mural. Even the coarse garments she

wore could not completely hide the animal sleekness and suppleness of her body.

'I am Carmen,' the girl introduced herself. She smiled, revealing a perfect set of teeth, as she added: 'And I hope you will be very happy here—very happy!' Then she burst out laughing. Still laughing, she went and sat on her bed, and kicked off her shoes. And all the time she laughed as if at a stupendous joke.

'Very happy,' she said again. 'Didn't Mother Superior tell you that you're now right in the gateway to Paradise? I don't think she has, for you look too glum. Well, now you know. So why don't you smile? This is the happiest day of your life—if only you knew it!'

Lucia flushed and turned quickly away, to come face to face with the second woman. She stopped and surveyed this woman with surprise. Never had she seen anyone so white. Everything about her was white: her face, hands, even her lips. Only her hair was black; it was of an extraordinary blackness that served to heighten the pallor of the face and the piercing intensity of the eyes. She had never seen anyone like this woman. . . .

Suddenly conscious of her unconcealed curiosity, she smiled quickly in greeting. In her ears was the sound of the other girl's taunting laughter, but she was glad to find that it had no further effect on her after the first shock.

'You'll be crying for him at night,' the girl was saying. 'And you'll tear the bed-clothes off you. But you'll be happy . . . very happy!'

Feeling unconcerned, Lucia prepared to introduce herself to the white woman, but before she could do so, the woman had walked past her and stood over the girl. Lucia watched as if fascinated. She saw the white woman slap the girl twice on the face. It sounded like a vicious whip-lash on wet flesh. The girl stopped laughing and for a moment stood with her mouth wide open, her eyes fixed in near-terror on the white face above her; then slowly she sank her head and began sobbing, rhythmically, hoarsely.

Then the white woman went over to Lucia and took her hand. 'You must forgive her,' she said. 'She's often distraught. She can't help it. . . . My name is Maria and I hope we shall get on well together—the three of us.'

The refectory was a long, narrow room with a high ceiling. It was lit by three naked electric bulbs. The women—there were thirty-six of them—sat at trestle tables. A moderate amount of talk was allowed at table, but if a voice was raised unnecessarily high, one of the nuns at the head table would ring a small bell.

On a raised platform in one corner stood a nun reading aloud passages from the Bible. Her voice went on disciplined, unhurried, apparently undisturbed by the general lack of attention. It was many, many years now since the nuns had stopped trying to make the women listen to the reading while they ate. But the reading practice was continued all the same. It was a rule and, however old and time-worn, it had to be followed. Above everything else, this house was a house of rules. . . .

Lucia had no appetite for the food. She thought of John and wondered where he was and what he was doing. She was surprised to find how far away he seemed. She closed her eyes and tried to capture his image—but it was blurred. She could not understand it, when all the time he was real and tangible in her heart. She thought of her father and her last meeting with him, and she felt the tears in her eyes. She saw again his withered face on the hospital pillow and heard his voice, filling her with shame.

But, strangely, it was not shame she was feeling now. Not even bitterness. Instead it was a calmness, a restfulness as when John had his arms around her and filled her heart with his love. That kind of feeling, without the heady excitement.

After prayers that night, she remained a long time awake in bed. The long, coarse flannel nightdress clung to her body uncomfortably. The night was warm. She turned from side to side awake, but unable to think. From the bed on her left, came the sound of Carmen tossing and breathing hard. Some-

times she could hear the girl talking to herself, and she knew she was finding it as difficult to sleep as she was. And Carmen, according to her own admission, had been at the Institute over six months!

O God, she thought, make ^{me} sleep. Make me sleep every night of the week and every night of each month.

No sound came from the white woman's bed. She found herself envying this woman who sat straight in the refectory, ate her meals without a word, was so composed, so calm—even if her eyes stared a little too much. This woman, who had come to the Institute four months ago, could sleep like a normal person!

O God, let me be like her, she prayed. Let me sleep!

Her prayer, however, remained unanswered, even up to the time the grey wall of the small yard began to take shape in the dim light of daybreak. She listened, almost with awe, to Maria's regular breathing; then looked at the slim, youthful figure of Carmen standing at the window, her face pressed against the iron bars, staring at nothing.

2

The doctor was a short, heavily-built man of uncertain years. When he talked to her, she felt he was hardly aware of her presence. His eyes, behind thick lenses, appeared to be perpetually fixed on a point somewhere to the left of her. Now and then, he touched her with his cold hands—now her eyelids, then her arm, then her belly with one prodding finger and the stethoscope—then he made some notes in a small, black notebook.

'You may dress now,' he said, and went back to his notebook, giving her his back as he sat on the high stool in front of the narrow desk.

That same afternoon, she was summoned to Mother Superior's room.

'I have received the doctor's report about you,' the nun said, holding in her hand a sheet of white paper. 'Your health is in a satisfactory condition, and it is expected that you will

become a mother in due course.' She laid down the paper and looked at Lucia. 'In normal circumstances, child,' she said, 'such an occasion should be one of joyful anticipation. As things are, however, it is my duty to point out to you that it would be in your best interests to purge yourself of all untoward feelings of joy, and to meditate on the sin you have committed. My child, you have much to pray and atone for. On the other hand, you must, under no circumstances, wish this event not to occur. For, by so doing, you would be burdening your conscience still further. Pray that the Lord may be merciful to you. That is all.'

In the days that followed, Lucia fought hard against the surge of delight that filled her. Sometimes she felt her joy so keenly that she had difficulty in preventing her emotions from becoming too silent.

She applied herself to her daily tasks, sewing, scrubbing floors, with a zeal and energy that left her weak. But never, even for one single moment, could she forget that she was bearing John's child. While the other women chatted at the work-tables, she was silent, driving in the stitches as if hers was a race against time—a race against the joy that was always on the point of flooding her and making her forget where she was or what she was doing, almost compelling her to run unbidden to her room and there be alone with her thoughts.

I am bearing his child, she thought. No matter what happens I shall be the mother of his child. Nothing else matters, not even the separation!

She looked about her for other women in the same situation as herself. She thought she would be able to bare her heart with such women. She found three or four. But they resented her, and so she turned away, and, for the first time since she entered the institute, she knew a deep loneliness.

One evening, she found herself alone with Maria. She told the white woman everything, all about her joy and her hopes. Expectantly, she glanced at the face of the other woman, hoping to catch a glimpse of understanding. This woman she

had learnt to love and respect was different from the others; there was something about her she felt she could trust. In her eyes, she had seen wisdom and the aloofness of one who had experienced much. Perhaps she could become her lifelong friend. It was the trust she felt in her. . . .

Maria turned her white face to her and said: 'I wish I could give you joy, my friend. But that would be to raise your hopes unnecessarily.'

Lucia felt as if a cold hand had been laid upon her. She looked at the woman with concern. 'Why do you tell me this, Maria?' she asked. 'Why should I be afraid to hope?'

Maria's eyes faltered, and she looked away.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I did not know what I was saying. Of course, you must hope; it is very fair and proper to . . . to the young one for you to hope, although I feel certain that Mother Superior has warned you . . .'

'Yes, yes,' Lucia interposed quickly. 'She said I must be sorry for my sin. Of course, I am sorry for it, but I cannot regret bearing this child. Please, believe me.'

Then when the white woman did not reply, she continued: 'I speak to you like this because I feel you will understand. You are so kind, Maria, kinder than any other woman I have known!'

'I envy you, dear,' Maria said suddenly. 'I would hate you to have this child even. Please, forgive me.'

'But why . . .?'

Maria's hands moved as if to clasp each other; but they remained where they were. 'You must understand me, too,' she said. 'I cannot have a child like you. Once I could, but I was afraid, so I let them kill it. My poor, poor child! . . . That's why I'm here. They said my place should be in prison; but they sent me here instead . . .'

She rose abruptly and made to go. Lucia looked at her, unable to move. Then she caught hold of Maria's hand and pulled her back gently to her side.

'Dearest friend,' she said, putting an arm around her. 'I understand now. I shall do everything for you.'

'What can you do?' said Maria gruffly.

'I can talk to you—about your baby.'

She half expected the woman to rise again, and so she tightened her grip on her hand. But the white woman remained seated. She did not move or say anything.

Then the bell rang for evening prayers. Lucia kept Maria's hand in hers, and she kept close to her so that the nuns would not notice.

And in the night she heard Maria's breath as she slept, and her own thoughts that again would not let her sleep. She heard Carmen getting out of bed and go to the window.

She will be waiting for the dawn again, she mused.

And when at last, the dawn truly came, she thought it rather strange to be thinking not of Carmen or of Maria, or even of her father and John, but of an old priest who took a long time to die. . . .

CHAPTER XXXV

I

Carmen was leaning on the garden spade, in an attitude of concentration and effortless balance. Looking at her, Lucia wondered why she could never really feel at ease with her. Perhaps it was the way she had laughed on that first day, or perhaps because, like her, she spent most of the nights thinking instead of sleeping, and wanting to be alone with her thoughts and not with someone who lived her kind of agony. Sometimes, sameness does not unite; it separates. . . .

The two had been assigned to the geranium bushes at the far end of the garden that morning. They were alone, and the shade thrown by the high wall and the trees was pleasant. The chatter of other women wafted to them from the kitchen garden.

'Why doesn't he marry you?' Carmen asked her, rocking herself gently on the spade-handle.

'I have never asked him,' Lucia replied slowly.

'Fool!' Carmen shook her head, and her hair flashed golden. She gave a short laugh. 'It's different with me. He wanted to marry me. But I wouldn't let him. He bored me. I went out with no less than three boys, while he thought I had only him. You've never seen a one like him. Rolling with money, he was. That's why my family put him on me. But I didn't want him. . . . You know, they sent me here, just in time. I was ready to get myself into trouble with someone else, just to get rid of him; that would have been one in the eye for my family. But they were cute! So when I stayed the night out with Gorg—that's one of the three—they bundled me here. But they did it more for spite than anything else, because he had come to know about it, see, and broken everything off. My family's pretty cute. They're all there . . .!'

'Let's go now, Carmen,' said Lucia gently. 'We've got nothing else to do here.'

'Wait' . . . You know what's so awful about it. I'm here and I'm in no trouble like you. I wouldn't let Gorg come near me that night. I was in an awful mood! So it's all for nothing, see? That's why I can't sleep—that's part of the reason I can't . . . Now had I been like you, I'd know I deserved to be here. It's awful. I . . . I'll go crackers if they keep me here long. I can't do without boys. Why doesn't he marry you?'

Lucia was spared from having to answer. Maria had come on them suddenly; one moment she wasn't there, the next moment she was. Her eyes were half-closed as she surveyed them. She seemed to be taking her time. She looked from one to the other as if she were noticing something about them she had not noticed before. Lucia had never seen her so white. She could hear Carmen fidgeting with the spade.

At last, the white woman's eyes fixed on the girl. 'I've been waiting ten minutes for you,' she told her, and her voice was low and heated. 'Next time you don't come to help me with the washing when you're supposed to, I'll report you.'

'This tree,' said Carmen, 'it gave us some trouble. Ask Lucia here. Ask her if you don't believe me.'

'Liar!' Maria spat out the word through clenched lips. 'Come. We have work to do.'

Carmen stood the spade against a tree-trunk. 'Very well,' she said.

As she watched the two walk away, Lucia thought: That's the fourth time she has done that. Even in the room she is always cutting in when Carmen is speaking to me. Those two can't bear the sight of each other.

But she thought these things cursorily, more for the sake of preventing herself from dwelling on the thoughts Carmen had provoked in her with her chatter.

2

In the afternoon after tea, she asked the refectory sister to make an appointment for her to see Mother Superior.

She received no answer for two whole days. On the third day, Sister Imelda appeared in the workroom and called her.

'Mother Superior desires to see you,' Sister Imelda announced shortly.

'I understand you wished to see me, Lucia,' said Mother Superior a while later.

Lucia looked down at the bare floor, not knowing how to begin. Carmen's words revolved in her mind; they tortured her as they had done all through the two whole days of waiting.

'Please forgive me, Mother,' she said at last. 'But I feel perplexed.'

'Perplexed, child?'

She took a deep breath and looked straight at Mother Superior. 'I was brought here against my will,' she said, 'and my child will be born outside wedlock. It is this problem which lies heavily on my mind.'

'Go on.'

'Before I was brought here, we, that is, he and I had an understanding. We contemplated marriage. Now that I am here, I feel he should be told that our marriage cannot be postponed much longer—for the sake of our child.'

She stopped, disconcerted by the fixed stare of the nun's eyes upon her. The room became silent. Although, outside, the sun was blazing, the room was comparatively dark. Its shadows seemed to form part of a perpetual twilight that was oppressive and old, so old that even the shadows thrown by odd objects about the room seemed static and worn with age. Lucia had a feeling that at some time in the distant past a set of beliefs had been formulated in this room that had remained unchanged right up to the present.

The sudden screeching of a jet-plane flying low overhead seemed to shake the room. But only momentarily. It was merely a slight quiver that the shadows gave; almost instantly they resumed their frozen immobility.

Lucia thought of a tired old man winking an unseeing eye open in his sleep that remains unbroken. She shrugged the imagery off her mind and said: 'It is my wish, Mother, that my young man should be informed of the situation.'

Now an almost imperceptible sigh escaped the older woman behind the desk. Lucia noticed it and wondered what it meant; it seemed to give her heart. Involuntarily, she made a step forward, so that she almost touched the desk with the tips of her outstretched fingers.

'The child,' she said, 'the child must not be made to suffer. I feel it already in me, and it fills me with sorrow and dread to think of its future. Oh, Mother, I implore you from my heart!'

'You are twenty years old,' the nun said. 'In a year's time, you will be free to choose. The Court's indictment will be powerless then. Until that day arrives . . .' Her eyes seemed to falter away from Lucia; it was the first time they had done so. But the movement was only momentary; her gaze was once more on Lucia when she continued: 'Until that day arrives, your place is here and in our keeping. Nothing that your child's father might or might not do could change the situation. You are here to reform . . .'

Lucia almost leaned over the desk. 'But it is not simply a question of my reformation now,' she exclaimed. 'It is also the question of my unborn child.'

'The young man, your child's father, was here barely twenty-four hours ago,' said Mother Superior suddenly.

Lucia felt her blood run cold. Her hand went to her throat to still its beating pulses, and her lips moved, forming words that did not come.

'He came. And he talked about you.'

'What . . . what did he say?' Lucia asked at last in a voice that was little more than a whisper.

'I feel that I satisfied him completely as regards your general well-being.' The nun's voice was steady.

'You told him . . .'

The nun made a slight gesture with her hand.

'I did not think that it was in your best interests or in his to make him acquainted with certain factors.'

Lucia stared at the nun, trying to anticipate her next words and preparing herself for them. But the nun was silent for a

long time. She sat perfectly still, regarding Lucia with a steady gaze. She looked as if she had gone to sleep with her eyes wide open.

But I am not going to give in so easily this time, Lucia thought grimly. I must know everything that transpired; there are so many things that are incomprehensible to me—things that I dread because they are hidden.

When she spoke again, her voice was low and polite, but firm.

'Forgive me, Mother,' she said, 'but I fail to understand why it was thought advisable to withhold from John all information about . . . about his own child!'

She could not help the bitterness that underlined her last words. Perhaps if she had not spoken thus, she might have broken down. And she did not want to weep!

She continued, desperately searching for the right words: 'May I please be allowed to ask why John was not told? He . . . he should have been told right away. For our child's sake. This is not mere vanity or persistence on my part, please believe me when I say that, Mother!'

'Enough, Lucia.' The nun rose suddenly, noiselessly. Looking at her, Lucia would never have imagined she was so tall. It was the very first time she had seen Mother Superior not sitting down. And she had never set eyes on her outside this room. She was not only tall, but young-looking. Lucia could not have thought it possible! The nun's face was now completely out of shadow, and it appeared full and rounded and unlined. The dry, pinched look in the shadows of the little, pillared alcove had been a travesty. She gasped at the transformation, and almost involuntarily assumed a more respectful attitude. She stood, her hands down at her sides, her head bowed.

The nun walked round the desk until she stood before her. As she moved, her garments made a slight swishing sound, and there was the tinkle of rosary beads. Lucia felt her presence as if she had touched her.

'You must understand, child,' the nun said. 'There are

certain rules from which one is not allowed to deviate. One of the rules by which we of this Institute are bound is that persons committed into our care should be considered primarily as souls to be saved from eternal damnation. It is in fact our guiding rule.'

But she is not answering my question, Lucia thought in sudden rebelliousness. She looked up at the nun, and said tensely: 'I am ready to be saved. I am willing to be saved. I shall not try to hamper in any way the good work that you are doing on my behalf. But the world is unkind, and my child must be saved, too, saved from this cruel world!'

'You need have no fears that, when your child arrives, it will not be taken good care of.'

'But when he leaves this house, with me, a year hence—what is going to happen then?'

'Then,' the nun replied calmly, 'with God's help, you will help your child to protect himself from the buffetings of the world outside these walls. We shall have trained you to do that.'

Lucia looked imploringly at the nun.

'Then you will not help me?'

'But what are you saying, my child?' said the nun, laying a light hand on Lucia's shoulder. 'We are helping you and your child even now by helping your soul to find the light again. Finding God again, you will have found Him for your child, too. Once you have reached that stage, you need have no further fears. Your sin has been great, Lucia, and its expiation will be long and arduous, but it will be done. You should be thankful for this mercy. What else do you require?'

'That my child should have his father's name—in the eyes of the world,' Lucia replied numbly. 'That is what I want most of all!' She watched the nun as she turned to her desk again. 'Can nothing, nothing be done?' she said.

'In that respect,' said the nun with her back to Lucia, 'nothing, yet. . . . Of course, when you leave the Institute, you will be at liberty to approach the father of your child with a view to having your union hallowed . . .'

'But before then . . .'

'Nothing.' The nun turned to face Lucia again. She stood with the fingers of one hand on the desk as if seeking support, however slight. . . . 'I am sorry, child. But it is for the best. Now go in peace.'

For an instant, Lucia remained where she stood, gazing at the nun, on her lips half-formed questions, in her eyes, now full of tears, puzzlement and uncertainty. Then she turned and quietly left the room.

In an interval of the silence that settled upon the room, Mother Superior stood motionless. Then she removed her fingers off the desk and her body seemed to sag. Slowly, she walked to her chair and sat down. The old shadows enveloped her again, so that she lost her youthfulness and the lines reappeared on her face, and the thin, pinched look.

She stared for a while at the door through which Lucia had passed; then slowly drew to her an envelope that lay on top of some papers on the desk. From it, she withdrew a small sheet of blue notepaper.

She read the words on it. She had read them many times in the last few weeks, but she read them again now as if there was something in them she could not fully understand.

The note read, after the usual salutations: 'Apropos your new inmate, Miss Lucia Zarb. It would be to the great advantage of herself and others whom I must desist from naming, if she were to be instructed, in the shortest possible time, in those virtues which she has unfortunately discarded in a moment of weakness. It is my earnest hope that her sojourn in your most excellent Institution may be of such great value to her that she may for ever renounce any desire that may still possess her of reverting to her culpable way of life and continuing her association with the gentleman to whom she had attached herself and for whom I bear the deepest respect and love . . .'

The note was signed: Monsignor Assalon Xiberrás.

The nun replaced the note in its envelope. Into her mind came the memory of the young man who had called on her,

his flushed face, his hurt eyes, his feverish manner. His card, with his name on it, was still in a drawer of her desk.

Another jet-plane shredded the heavy silence; the nun closed her eyes, and a shuddering she could not control took possession of her.

It was a moment of dread which seemed to stretch before her into an eternity of sleeplessness.

CHAPTER XXXVI

For John, the days had become nothing else but the slow movement of a process begun with his separation from Lucia and supposed to end on her twenty-first birthday.

His nights were black voids of racking thought, so that he welcomed the day when it came. But he hated the day almost as much as he hated the night. He worked hard at the Agency, for only by immersing himself in the routine of his job could he forget for a while the nightmares of the night and the disillusion of the day.

His interview with the Mother Superior of the Institute had left him in no doubt that no earthly power could mitigate or reduce the sentence the law had passed on Lucia. He could not even write to her. The letters he had written to her had been returned to him unopened. He did not write again.

He had been to his uncle, hoping that the Monsignor might use his influence to have Lucia released from the Institute. His uncle, however, had expressed regret at his inability to help him.

'You must consider, my dear John,' he told him, 'that the law of a country is a sacrosanct object, and not to be trifled with. Just as sacrosanct is the father's wish.' He added with a sad smile: 'On the other hand, considering some of the ideas our present government professes, it would be most unwise for anyone, a priest especially, to attempt to meddle with the law. Our enemies would pounce on such unwisdom with the ferocity of hungry lions. I am sorry but I cannot do a thing.'

'But surely,' John protested, 'it is also a duty, a moral duty that daughters should be adequately protected from the strange whims of their fathers.'

'Whims?'

'What else? And of a sick man, too, if you like. It is incredible that in the twentieth century fathers are still allowed to lock up their daughters just because they fall in love!'

'You forget, my dear boy,' rejoined the Monsignor condes-

cendingly, 'you forget that you yourself admitted that she spent a night with you, and that news travels fast, especially to the ears of fathers.'

John bit his lip with vexation. 'That was nothing. That was just . . . just an expression.'

'An expression, you say! . . . That may well be. In fact, let us hope that it was nothing more than an expression. But you tend to lose sight of the circumstances. The girl was living alone; she was in a helpless situation. Tell me, would you not have reacted in the same way had you been a father with a daughter in such a predicament?'

'I wanted to marry her,' John almost shouted. 'Did I not make that clear—to you, to the police?'

The Monsignor yawned. 'Please do not let us go over that matter again. There existed ponderous difficulties, on both sides.'

'So there only remains one thing,' said John. 'I must wait'—with bitter cynicism—'I must wait until she is able to make up her own mind! That is, until she reaches the stupendous age of twenty-one!' He turned to his uncle: 'Really it surprises me to see how blindly and idiotically we stick to a lot of conventional nonsense. As if a girl at twenty-one would be any the wiser than, say, at twenty!'

'Now you are talking like a Socialist,' the Monsignor beamed at him.

John shrugged, his shoulders despondently. 'I don't know about that. But from what I can see, thank God, things are being shaken up a bit here.'

'My dear fellow,' said the Monsignor, 'shaking things up a bit might also mean shaking things to pieces. But come, let me pour you out a drink. And I trust you will dine with me today.'

John returned to the flat to change, feeling in slightly better spirits. He felt he had at least someone in his family to whom he could safely turn in moments of doubt. Someone who really understood his problems. Not that his uncle had done anything to help him in this matter, but at least he had consis-

tently given him good reasons why he could not do so. His father, he sincerely believed, would have been the same had he not been so intolerably weak and dominated by his mother.

He returned to his uncle's house in time for dinner with a certain eagerness. He had always liked his uncle but he had never realized he could be such good company.

If only your mother knew!' the Monsignor said over the dinner-table. 'If she knew we were so often together, she would never forgive me. She would immediately suspect that I am aiding and abetting you in your little escapade.'

'I'm sure you would if you could.'

'But of course! But what can I do?'

John thought a while before he spoke. 'How about using your influence in another direction, uncle?' he asked.

'Tell me, how?'

'By persuading Lucia's father to reverse the Court Order.'

The Monsignor laughed. A flush of annoyance spread over John's face.

'What's funny about it?'

'Forgive me,' said the Monsignor, wiping the tears from his eyes with his table-napkin. 'But your suggestion is so naïve, my dear John, that it tickles my fancy. It amuses me. Do you seriously expect me to go to this man and tell him: "Look here, get your daughter out of there"? Why, his own Confessor would think twice before doing such a thing . . .! Do you see now why I laugh?'

He returned to his food, still a little amused.

'I see your point,' said John, his brow knit. The food tasted good, but he had no appetite for it.

'Now let me offer a suggestion,' said the Monsignor, laying down the wineglass. 'You look so tired and drawn that it grieves my heart to see you so. You need a complete change of atmosphere. After all, you can do nothing, absolutely nothing before the girl attains the age of twenty-one. Moping like this will not help you in the least. Come. I will myself talk to your manager about this change that I have proposed.'

John looked quickly at his uncle.

'I wouldn't like to leave or go anywhere while she is still in there,' he said.

'Nonsense,' said the Monsignor. 'What difference would it make if you were here or a thousand miles away? Do you think that by stopping home and killing yourself with worry you are going to help her or make the days pass more swiftly? Come, pull yourself together. You're still young. You would not want her to see you a broken man, old before your time, when she comes out of that Institute!'

The Monsignor spoke rapidly as if he held strong views on the matter. Hearing him speak, John felt his confidence in his uncle rising.

'I shall think it over,' he said.

'Good. And you will let me know tomorrow, will you not?'

All that day and for the greater part of the night, he thought of his uncle's words. Side by side with this was the thought of Lucía. Thinking of her, he almost felt physically sick. He looked over the terrace of the flat and wondered at the peace and calm of this night of harbour lights and chugging launches and stars and men. . . .

And he was conscious of her nearness. She had stood with him on this terrace, she had moved in these rooms, filling him with delight. Now all that separated them were a few miles of road and a high wall. But she was near.

It was an excruciating torment to have her so near and yet be separated from her. He felt it was impossible for him to bear it much longer.

His uncle was right. If he was to stay sane he must go away. He would take the memory of her with him and leave behind him the daily torment. The time would pass quickly, and he would come back to her whole and full of joy.

It was a prospect that enabled him to look down again with no particular feelings at the sheer drop to the harbour rocks below. . . .

The next day, he went to his uncle, his mind made up.

On hearing of his decision, the Monsignor poured him out a large brandy.

'Here, drink that,' he said handing him the glass, 'in honour of counsel wisely taken.' He looked quizzically at his nephew, then continued with a twinkle in his eyes: 'You may be surprised to hear that I anticipated your decision, so much so that last night I telephoned your superior at his home. Shall I tell you the outcome? Providence had it that he had been lately contemplating a request from the firm's head office to send a suitable man for further training to the Paris branch. I cannot tell you how relieved he was when I helped him settle his choice! My dear boy, I am exceedingly glad for you.'

CHAPTER XXXVII

I

The kitchen was in the basement, a large, stone-vaulted room, the walls begrimed with a century and a half of cooking. The range was composed of limestone blocks and brick, and it ran the whole length of a wall and a half of another. A huge, wooden cowl projecting from the wall took the smoke up the chimney. There were cauldrons that looked like overgrown pumpkins. The brass and the aluminium shone with a dull glitter, like uncut gems on a black bed.

A lay-nun ruled over this department with fastidious care. Here, with the days passing and the bulge beneath her dress becoming more pronounced, and the sewing-room were now the only places in which Lucia was permitted to work.

In time, she came to feel more at home in the kitchen than anywhere else. The nun in charge was a tall, angular woman with a long, undistinctive face devoid of colour, and large, red hands. She spoke gruffly and, at first, seemed to resent Lucia and censured her continually.

Lucia did not mind. Here, at least, she felt on equal ground with the nuns and, when she felt that the kitchen-sister was being too overbearing, she stood up for herself with a few, polite yet firm words. This invariably produced the desired effect: Sister Griselda—for that was the nun's name—would draw back with surprise in the middle of her reprimand and return with a mutter or two to whatever she had been doing.

But Sister Griselda had her bright moments, and these became more frequent as the time passed and the two women began to understand each other better. Then Lucia liked her and, seeing her sympathetically inclined to listen, she would talk about herself. It was not long before the two women—one young and anxious, the other old and curious—found themselves sharing confidences that would have been completely unthinkable in the company of others.

'I have been dedicated to this life since I was a child,' said Sister Griselda, 'and so I have never troubled to inquire too deeply into the more material things of this world. All the same, I sympathize with you, my dear, and I pray that the young beautiful life inside you will one day have a father . . .'

Then, as if suddenly remembering herself, she would stop abruptly, look around her in alarm, and put on her most formidable expression. 'But to work, Lucia,' she would say.

Lucia would turn away with a smile, knowing full well that it would not be long before the nun found an opportunity to resume the conversation. It was always the same: whatever the conversation was, Sister Griselda always managed to turn it round to the question of the child.

She usually spoke in her habitual, unsentimental and coldly analytical manner; but once, she betrayed a real, subjective interest in the matter.

'I do hope he will have your eyes, Lucia,' she said. 'They are so pretty!'

But, almost immediately, she crossed herself and turned away abruptly to the large boilers that were steaming on the galley.

For the rest of the day, she did not address another word to Lucia. .

2

One morning, Sister Griselda was called away to Mother Superior and returned in a state of trepidation.

'Lucia,' she said, clasping and unclasping her bony hands nervously, 'there is not a moment to lose. We must prepare.'

'Prepare?' repeated Lucia, slightly disturbed at the nun's appearance.

'It is the Committee. They are paying a visit to the Institute. There is no time to lose.'

Three other women were called in, and these, aided and directed by Sister Griselda and Lucia, scrubbed and dusted and polished the kitchen till late in the afternoon.

Sister Griselda went about with face suffused with a feverish

flush. She peered into corners, passed a nervous finger along the rims of jugs and pitchers, washed and rinsed pots and pans which the others had already done, and scrubbed large areas of the floor immediately after they had been scoured by the others. There was no holding Sister Griselda that day!

Lucia worked with zest and, though sometimes a little stabbing pain would shoot across the small of her back, she did not heed it but continued with the work.

When the work was finished, the three helpers went away to their normal stations in the Institute and Lucia hurried to her room to change. She took some pains over her hair, and when she re-entered the kitchen, where Sister Griselda was awaiting her with much impatience, it gleamed as goldenly and smoothly as the kitchen brass.

She felt a little excited. The coming of this Committee, whatever it was, made a welcome break in the orderly tedium of life at the Institute. It was as if the Committee was coming to inject a little outside air. She hoped that the other women would regard the coming of this Committee in the same manner. Joy was better when shared.

Sister Griselda waited by the kitchen door in a state of apprehension. Her face never looked sallow, her eyes never so feverishly bright. Her hands fidgeted constantly with the beads of the rosary dangling from her tunic belt. She looked about her uncertainly, and when the sight of the gleaming utensils seemed to reassure her, she would instantly utter a moan at imagined shortcomings in the arrangement of her kitchen.

'Sister Griselda,' Lucia called.

'Yes, yes?'

'You have not yet explained to me what this Committee is.'

'Committee?' said the nun, her eyes ranging the kitchen again. 'Ladies. All ladies. They perform good works on behalf of the Institute. Lucia that grill looks none too clean.'

At last they heard the hum of voices in the corridor upstairs. Then footsteps down the short, twisting stairs that led to the kitchen door. Lucia straightened herself and stood calmly watching the door. On hearing the voices, Sister

Griselda had made a swift step forward and now stood on one side of the door, her eyes peering up the spiralling stairs to catch a glimpse of the visiting ladies. Her rosary beads were rattling so loudly that even she noticed it. Firmly but with some effort she clasped her hands. And only just in time, for the Committee suddenly appeared at the door.

There were five ladies in all, all elderly and smartly yet demurely dressed, accompanied by Mother Superior.

Four of the ladies surrounded Sister Griselda. She seemed to nod her head more than speak. Lucia felt a little amused watching the obvious discomfiture in which Sister Griselda was finding herself. She could not imagine how the poor nun was going to answer all those questions with which the ladies plied her.

Just then she became aware of the fifth lady of the Committee. She stood with Mother Superior just inside the door; the two were talking. Lucia watched against her will. She could not help the wave of admiration that passed over her; she marvelled at the finely-chiselled face, the exquisite smallness of her figure, the subdued elegance of her clothes, the silvery hair beneath a hat the like of which she had never seen before, and the blue eyes, the fine skin, the delicate chin. . . . She was totally different from the others of the Committee. This lady stood distinctively apart. Lucia continued to look at this woman with unconcealed admiration. She felt immediately attracted to her. That's how I would like to look when I am her age, she mused. Perhaps queens produced exactly the same feelings in their subjects. She did not know. . . .

The others were slowly touring the kitchen, escorted by a Sister Griselda who had found her rosary beads again but, apparently, not her tongue.

Lucia felt her blood surge through her and her heart beat wildly when she saw the lady she had been admiring leave Mother Superior's side and walk towards her. Immediately her eyes sank to the floor, and she felt a constriction in her throat which mixed strangely with the feeling of delight she felt

when the lady stopped in front of her.

Slowly she raised her eyes and looked at those which were calmly surveying her. And again there was that puzzling sensation of excitement.

'Are you comfortable here?' the lady asked her.

'Yes, thank you, ma'am,' she managed to reply, quickly averting her gaze from those examining eyes.

'And you find the work congenial?'

'Yes, ma'am. I . . . I mean it is work I enjoy doing.'

'Do you feel that you are benefiting from your stay here?' the lady asked her after a slight pause.

Lucia's face flushed. She did not know what to reply.

'Never mind,' said the lady. 'Forgive me, perhaps the question is too personal.'

'Thank you,' Lucia whispered, relieved.

Then as she felt rather than saw the woman's eyes go over her, she became acutely conscious of her condition. Her lips trembled, as shame filled her and she wished the woman would leave her. All she wanted now was to escape from that woman's eyes. . . .

She was not prepared for the lady's next move. She moved closer to her and said in a half-audible whisper: 'I hope you will be happy, my dear.' And she immediately turned away and joined Mother Superior who had not moved from the door. As in a trance, she watched the two leave the kitchen together without waiting for the others.

She remained perfectly still for a long time, troubled by a vague feeling of uneasiness whose cause she was unable to fathom. . . .

After the visitors had left Lucia tried to find out who the lady was who had spoken to her, but Sister Griselda was too distraught to answer. She covered her face with her hands and moaned: 'Oh, I feel so ashamed, I'm sure they found hundreds of things that were dirty. Whatever will Mother Superior say?'

And despite all Lucia's efforts to cheer her up she refused to be consoled.

That night, in the bedroom, Lucia recounted to her two room-mates the Committee's visit to the kitchen. Although she described to them as accurately as she could the lady of the Committee who had spoken to her, neither of them could tell her who she was.

Carmen, in fact, was plainly uninterested.

'I don't know these women's names,' she said from across the room, 'and I couldn't care less! And the fuss everyone makes when they come!'

'They do us a lot of good,' remarked Maria from the edge of Lucia's bed, without looking up from her sewing. She was stitching the frayed sleeves of one of Lucia's working-dresses.

'Maria is right, Carmen,' said Lucia, 'they do a lot of good by their charity.'

'Charity!' said Carmen, pouting. 'Some charity! Just because they knit us a few jumpers every winter. Fat lot of good that is! Why don't they get us out of this hell of a place? That's what I call charity!'

'You're talking rubbish,' said Maria breaking the cotton with unnecessary violence. 'It's not these women's fault that we are here. The fault is ours—and the law's. And you know it. You just think you're smart talking like that!'

Oh, not again, thought Lucia. These two are like cat and dog. She made up her mind to turn the talk to something less controversial; but she did not have the chance. Carmen was speaking.

'You like being here, don't you?' she sneered at Maria.

At this, Maria sprang to her feet with such suddenness that Lucia started with surprise. The woman was trembling violently, and her eyes looked as white as her face. Her bloodless lips quivered.

Lucia stretched out a restraining hand to her, but Maria pushed it away.

'When are you going to learn to keep your big mouth shut?' she hissed at Carmen.

Lucia sighed. She could not understand it. This constant bickering between the two women was beginning to get on her nerves. Some time, tomorrow if possible, she would ask the nuns to give her another room. She felt she could not go on like this.

'Don't quarrel, please,' she begged weakly.

Carmen laughed—that harsh, sudden laugh which Lucia had come to know so well and dread.

'Quarrel!' said Carmen. 'Listen to the poor dear! We're not quarrelling, are we, Maria? We're just having a lovers' tiff. Don't you know, we must go on pretending even here, or we'll go nuts. Though, frankly, Maria doesn't exactly make the right boy-friend.'

Things happened quickly and without warning. There was a strangled cry from Maria and, before Lucia could stop her, she had thrown herself at Carmen. Soon the two were fighting in earnest. They rolled on the floor. They tore at each other with a savagery Lucia would never have thought possible. She stood helplessly over them as they rolled and pitched on the floor, tearing at each other's hair and clothes. Carmen screamed at every pull or blow she gave; Maria pulled and tore in silent, gasping violence. . . .

The noise brought the other women rushing to the room. They stood at the door, hunched and white-faced, watching in silent, breathless fascination the sprawling, heaving bodies on the floor.

There was a movement in the silent, giggling group, and the night-sister burst into the room.

She flung up her arms in the air. 'Stop it, you two,' she cried. 'Stop this disgraceful conduct at once.' Then she stepped resolutely forward and gripped both the women by the hair. She was a hefty woman and her grip was as good as her intentions. She tugged until the two fell apart. Slowly they rose from the floor, panting hard and eyeing each other venomously. Only then did the nun release their hair.

Carmen rubbed her head ruefully. 'What d'you think I'm made of—straw!' she spat at the nun.

'Mother Superior will hear of this in the morning,' the nun said. 'It is nothing short of disgraceful!'

Maria and Carmen went to sit on their respective beds, each wearing a bitter, dejected look. Maria sat still, staring. Not so Carmen: she passed her hands all over her body, feeling gingerly where it smarted and uttering moans when she pressed a little too much.

'I thought you were pulling my hair out,' she said ruefully, looking protestingly at the nun.

'I cannot understand what has come over you both,' said the nun in a more conciliatory voice. 'And I hope that this vulgar, shameful incident will not be repeated.'

'It is since Lucia came,' said Carmen suddenly with the last bit of defiance left in her. 'Before—when we were just the two—we weren't like this. It's since she came.'

Lucia stared at her, scarcely believing her ears.

'Since I came, Carmen?' she said aghast. 'I have never done you or Maria any harm.'

'You are out of your senses, Carmen,' broke in the night-sister, 'talking like this. It is only a poor excuse for your bad behaviour. It is unfair to Lucia.'

'I'm sorry,' Carmen said grudgingly. 'I didn't mean what I said.' She looked at Lucia from under her long eyelashes. 'Forgive me, Lucia.'

'That is much better,' said the nun, evidently pleased. She turned to the silent women at the door. 'Now, come on, all of you,' she ordered, waving them away. 'It is past bedtime. I shall inform Mother Superior of this occurrence, but, of course, she may be lenient to these two if they promise to behave better henceforth.'

Carmen flung herself full length on the bed. 'Oh, we promise,' she said. She turned her face towards Maria. 'And you, Maria, promise too, don't you?' she said, smirking.

Maria's lips moved. 'I promise.'

'Very well,' said the nun preparing to leave the room and ushering before her some of the women who had remained at the door. 'Now that you have made your peace, it is time you

all went to sleep.' And she walked out with a satisfied air. . . .

That night, Luçia slept fitfully. The events of the day, culminating in the ugly scene between Maria and Carmen had affected her deeply, and she had strange and disturbing dreams. . . . In one she seemed to see Maria cross the room in the dark till she came to the side of Carmen's bed . . . and their whispering together . . . and someone sighing as in a fever . . . and the creaking of a bed, and then sobbing. . . .

CHAPTER XXXVIII

I

Now that she came to think of it, she was surprised to find how little she had thought about her father. All the time she had been at the Institute he had been no more to her than a dim shape, a low, white mound in a room of shapes and strange smells, as distant from her as she was from the old life she had known before everything had begun: cleaning the shop, doing her bed in the little, low-ceilinged room upstairs with the wine-fumes, praying to the terra-cotta Virgin on the chest-of-drawers, cooking in the dingy kitchen with the strings of fat, mauve onions.

All that now seemed a world away, as unreal as her dreams which lately had become restless and spaced with nightmares.

Throughout, only one image had retained for her any meaning at all—that of John. She thought of him often; the memory of him was the bridge that spanned the widening gap between the new life and the life she had left behind. Thinking of him still stirred her emotions, warmed her and left her cold the next instant. He was still real to her.

About her father she felt differently. She thought of him with a kind of resignation that frightened her as much as it filled her with near self-disgust.

Never for one moment had she felt any anger towards him for what he had done to her. In fact, from the very start, she had never questioned his right to send her to the Institute. On the other hand, the warmth that she had always felt for him had faded away after the first month or so. From then on, she had neither hated him nor thought much about him. She wished it was not so. She wished their relationship had not changed!

It was without any particular emotion that she received the news one morning that she was to be allowed to visit him in hospital. A nun called Sister Beatrice would accompany her.

The moment the wrought-iron gates of the Institute closed behind them, Lucia felt faint and she felt unable to do another step. She stood on the pavement conscious of the change. It had been too sudden.

Here stretched the quiet, tree-lined street. The tree-tops with the electricity poles punctuating their unbroken line appeared vertiginous in the mid-morning light of sky. The asphalted road seemed to be set at a treacherous angle. Her breath came in gasps.

Sister Beatrice looked anxiously at her face. 'Are you not feeling well?' she asked.

Lucia tried to smile. 'It's . . . it's the change, I suppose,' she stammered. 'For a moment, it made me feel dizzy.' She drew in a deep breath. 'But come, let us go.'

They walked to the bus-stop, Sister Beatrice hurrying along on quick, jerky feet, as if she were in a hurry to get the little outing over as soon as possible to return once more to the familiar world behind the high walls.

They had to change buses twice to reach the hospital.

The porter raised his finger to his cap when he saw them. 'I was told about you,' he told them, grinning toothlessly. 'Come in.' And he held the gate open for them.

Walking through the grounds, Lucia suddenly realized that these were not the usual visiting hours and, except for herself and Sister Beatrice, the only people about were nurses and a few men with spotlessly white gowns. She glanced up at the high, many-windowed building without expression. She asked herself why she had not asked the reason for this visit when news of it was brought to her from Mother Superior. The thought had not come to her then—that was all! Now, as she entered the building with the nun gliding noiselessly beside her, the meaning became clear to her.

Her father was dying. It was strange that she had not thought of this possibility before. There could be no other reason: no woman ever left the Institute except in circumstances of death and when the time came for her to leave it for ever. . . .

The ward was strangely quiet—much quieter than Lucia had ever known it. A few of the patients down one end were sitting up in their beds, their eyes opened wide, staring towards one corner. Some had rosaries in their hands and they mumbled with lips that hardly moved. Others just watched, their arms folded across their chests.

The acrid smell of burning candle and warm oil struck Lucia's nostrils even before she saw the group gathered round her father's bed. The Friar was there reading from a book, now and then making signs with his fingers over the man in the bed. On each side of him was a nurse, who said 'Amen' and sometimes 'Misericordia' in response to the Friar's praying. Both looked slightly self-conscious.

Lucia stepped forward, awed, towards the candlelit corner. Seeing her, the Friar raised his eyes momentarily from his book, glanced closely at her, nodded absently and continued to read.

Her father appeared to be asleep. The bones on his grey face stood out, casting shadows into his hollow cheeks. He lay with his mouth half-open and a rasping sound came from it. The Friar nodded to her again, and she sank to her knees by the bedside. She called her father, but he did not seem to hear. She leaned forward and placed her mouth closer to his ear that he might hear her better.

She called him again and again, until, at last, his head moved and his eyes flickered. The rasping stopped for a moment and he licked his lips.

'I don't feel no pain,' he said.

'It is I—Lucia.'

'Lucia? Lucia?' An intelligent gleam came to his eyes. 'These doctors are a rotten lot,' he said.

She heard the Friar sigh heavily behind her, but her eyes remained on her father.

'Lucia,' old Toni said. 'Lucia, you must be good. Good, like your mother. She was a one, your mother. Must be good . . . For I have sinned and beg forgiveness . . .'

His voice trailed off and the rasping began again, inter-

spersed with odds and ends of speech that made no coherent sense, except perhaps to himself.

She watched with a strange fascination. The nearness of the thing gave her a sense of tranquillity. She took his hand, felt its coldness and decay. She kissed it.

'The shop, Lucia.' The words came clearly again. 'You must rinse the glasses well. Wine sparkles in rinsed glasses. . . . The doctors, they patched me up. They meant well . . . But you must be good. Don't let that man come near you. You must swear to me . . .'

When she heard the sobbing of the boy in the other bed, she raised her eyes. So he was still here! . . . He was sitting up, resting on one elbow, his eyes swimming in tears, glistening hard in the candlelight.

He sobbed across to her: 'Been asking for you since yesterday. He'd have recognized you if only you'd come yesterday. It gives me a pain here'—he touched his throat—'to think of it!' And his sobs turned into uncontrollable weeping. And the nurse emerged from the shadows and went to the boy who was learning fast.

There was nothing else to be done. The doctor came, glanced at the dying man, syringe in hand. He bent low over the bed, so low that his head nearly touched hers. Then he straightened himself up again and shook his head at the Friar.

It was the Friar's turn to bend over Toni. 'You have made your peace with the Lord, Toni. Prepare to go and meet Him.' He repeated the words twice; the third time, Toni was already dead. The Friar turned slowly to Lucia and said, so near that she could smell his breath: 'He loved you very much. That is a great consolation.'

She rose. Her legs were hurting her after the long kneeling. She kissed the still hand, then the cold, hard forehead. Then she turned and almost ran to Sister Beatrice who was waiting outside the ward.

The day after, they allowed her to go to the hospital again for her father's funeral.

She stood under a tree with Sister Beatrice and saw the men lowering the long, narrow coffin into the fresh hole. The soil scooped on the sides was dark red and it smelt of dew on moss. The birds twittered overhead. A ship's siren from Msida Creek pierced through the twittering and the Friar's chanting. Even the birds stopped to listen to the echoes as they stretched, diminishing, through the air to an indefinable ending that could have been anywhere in all that space.

She turned away with Sister Beatrice towards the gate at the end of the slope. Seeing them the Porter hastened to open the gate for them. He touched his cap with a newspaper as they passed through. She smiled at him and just caught a headline: BETTER DEAL FOR THE OLD FOLKS.

On the bus^{back} she was seized by an irresistible desire to see John. The desire was so sudden and great that it nearly took her breath away . . .

When the bus at last arrived at the terminus at Valletta, she turned to the nun and said: 'There's somewhere I must go.'

Sister Beatrice was instantly on her guard. 'We must return to the House,' she said. 'It's late already.'

'It is only down the next street,' said Lucia, her heart in her mouth. 'I promise you I won't be long.'

She turned instantly and walked away. Behind her she could hear the nun's footsteps hurrying to keep up with her, and her whispered protests. But it didn't matter to her now. She hardly felt the faint, regular tugs the nun gave the back of her dress. The street was crowded with people doing their shopping at the many pavement stalls or talking in groups in the middle of the pavement. . . . The noise was great, but she was hardly aware of it. . . .

At last she came to the Agency. People were entering and leaving and for a moment doubt filled her. Suppose he was too busy to see her!

'We must return at once,' pleaded Sister Beatrice, catching up with her at last. 'What would Mother Superior say if she knew?'

'She need not know,' she replied cruelly, and walked inside.

At the first counter was a young boy of about seventeen or eighteen. His hair gleamed cleanly in the neon light, and his scrubbed young face held in it the dedication of the first job.

'Yes, ma'am?' he asked when he saw her. 'What can I do for you?'

Her lips quivered. He was leaning towards her with an affected poise that concealed little of his eagerness to serve and serve well. Her throat felt dry. She said: 'I . . . I would like to see Mr John Xiberras, please.'

It was done. She had said it. It brought her relief.

The boy frowned slightly, obviously disappointed, then gave an apologetic smile. 'I'm afraid that's not possible, ma'am,' he said. 'Mr Xiberras is in Paris at the moment. He left Malta three weeks ago. If there is anything else . . .'

But she was not listening. She moved to the door as if some impelling force was driving her. Sister Beatrice appeared hopefully before her.

'We can go now, eh?' the nun said.

She followed Lucia out into the street and hastened to keep pace with her.

'You weren't there for more than a minute,' she said in a pleased voice. 'You are a good girl, Lucia, as good as your word. You are a virtuous one.'

They were fortunate enough to find a seat in the bus all to themselves. Sister Beatrice settled herself as comfortable as she could on the inside of the seat directly by the window and, for the rest of the long journey back to the Institute, she dozed peacefully and contentedly.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The Countess Ermeline was on the veranda seeing to her opal-blue budgerigar when her brother-in-law was announced.

'Ermeline, my dear,' the Monsignor said, taking her hand.

'It is nice to see you again, Assalon,' she said, and sighed.

The Monsignor looked closely at her.

'You sighed,' he said

'I feel so worried over Très Bien,' she explained.

'Très Bien?' inquired the Monsignor with another puzzled look at her.

'The budgerigar,' she said 'He has not touched a particle of food for two whole days!'

'Let me see,' said the Monsignor. He walked over to the ornamented cage and looked in. 'His feathers seem to be sticking on end,' he said. 'You are right, Ermeline. There is something the matter with him.'

He turned to the Countess and, noticing her distress, remarked kindly: 'Of course, the situation is far from irremediable. The poor creature is obviously suffering from a severe stomach upset and, in such circumstances, it is brandy that is most recommended.'

'Brandy?'

'Precisely. If you will oblige me with a few drops, I promise you that your pet will recuperate in no time at all.'

While the Countess went to find the brandy, the Monsignor opened the door of the cage and inserted his hand. With great gentleness, he grasped the bird in one hand and brought him out; then, with thumb and finger he plucked from its wings a young feather. Cupping the bird in his hands, he proceeded to rub his smooth chin against its head. He cooed to it. He stroked its beak. He looked at its half-closed eyes, and a tear rolled down his cheek.

When finally the Countess reappeared, he said to her: 'I have never in my whole life kept a bird. They are so small and so defenceless. It grieves me immeasurably to see the

little creatures caged up when they should be out on the trees and among the beautiful flowers enjoying untrammelled what God has given them as their birthright.' He smiled. 'But, of course, with budgerigars it is different, eh? . . . But let us not digress. Our principal aim is to restore this little rascal to perfect health. Allow me, Ermeline.'

He dipped the feather in the glass she was holding, so that only its fine tip was wet. Then he passed the feather lightly across the bird's mouth, a process which he twice repeated.

'Well,' he said, throwing away the feather and lifting the bird to his face again. 'The treatment is over. Soon Très Bien will be *très bien* again, you mark my words.'

He opened the cage-door, replaced the bird on its perch, patted it lightly on its back with a finger and closed the door and fastened it.

He turned to the Countess with a satisfied smile. 'It is very simple, is it not?' he said.

'What kind hands you have, Assalon!' she said with relief.

The Count came out just then. He looked pale in the sun and his baldness seemed to accentuate the lines on his face. He greeted his brother with a smile. 'Assalon,' he said, 'how good to see you.' Then he pointed to the chairs. 'Why do we not sit down?' he said. 'It is pleasant to sit down when you are among friends and the weather so mellow . . .'

His voice trailed off as they sat down on the wicker chairs, and for a while none of them spoke. The Countess cast frequent glances to the bird in the cage. The pagoda in the centre of the garden glittered in the sun, and a sparrow perched on it and hopped down its curved slope, and up again. Then it flew off.

'I have received another letter from John,' said the Mon-signor.

The Count said: 'From John?' but his voice implied no real interest and so his brother ignored him.

'It is the best letter I have had from him.' He glanced quickly at the Countess, but she still had her head turned away. She was watching the budgerigar.

'Perhaps you are not interested in John's letter, Ermeline?' he said.

'I am always interested in my son,' she said.

'Good,' said the Monsignor. 'Then I shall tell you what he says in his letter. He is having a most wonderful experience and his heart seems to have found a little contentment . . .'

The Count had dozed off. He sat, hunched in his chair, his chin resting limply on his chest.

My God, thought the Monsignor, this brother of mine is a sick man.

He turned again to the Countess.

'Why do you not write to John, Ermeline?' he asked.

She looked at him and in a voice of one who has rehearsed the words over and over again, replied: 'He has broken away from us. Not till he returns to the home he has spurned will I deem it my duty to address myself to him.'

'Ah, but you are a hard woman,' rejoined the Monsignor.

She gave him a look that made him avert his gaze.

'I know what you are thinking,' he added. 'You feel it is impossible to reconcile yourself to him while he still has this girl in his heart. And that I should know it is so. Am I not right?'

'It has been so from the very beginning.'

'I do not blame you. But now the situation has changed slightly. And one's attitude must change as and when the situation warrants.' He moved his chair closer to her. 'Ermeline, I would like you very much to write to John at once, today, in fact. No, no, let me finish. Write to him and tell him that when he returns from Paris he will be welcome in this house. It is an invitation, you understand?'

She looked out into the garden. 'I feel it beyond me to do such a thing,' she said slowly.

'You must swallow your pride now, Ermeline,' said the Monsignor, a little impatiently. 'The situation warrants it. Nor think, my dear: this sojourn of his in that fabulous city is bound to have reawakened in him a semblance at least of his old normality. Normality must be followed by normality if it

is to remain so. And what is more normal for a prodigal than to be received back into his old home from which he has long been exiled?’

She sat still, and by her manner of looking at the garden and at the cage and never at him forced the Monsignor to feel that his words were not producing any effect upon her. He changed his position in the chair and laid a slender, white hand on her arm.

‘What I am asking you to do is an essential part in my plan,’ he told her. ‘Without it, everything may yet come to nothing, all our efforts be unavailing.’ He added reproachfully: ‘You have asked for my advice before, Ermeline, and have followed it. Please do what I suggest now.’

The Count gave a violent start and woke up. ‘Did I hear John?’ he asked.

‘You did not, Thomas,’ said the Monsignor, turning to him. ‘Most probably you heard your own snores.’

‘Yes, it might have been that,’ said the Count. He rose slowly from the chair. ‘I often hear things and people when there is nothing there. It is a strange failing with me. Sometimes I feel I am not right here.’ He pointed to his head and managed a smile and a wink. ‘Ah, well,’ he continued, ‘I must return to my room. There are so many things I feel I must do, and yet I never seem to start doing them! Were you ever in such a predicament, my brother? . . . But I must not disturb you with my talk . . .’

He walked quietly away. After a few paces, however, he stopped and said: ‘I was so certain it was John’s voice I heard.’ He stood in thought for a moment, then shrugged. ‘Ah well, it is nothing,’ he remarked to himself. He left the verandah and it was as if he had never been there. . . .

‘I would like her to be attended by Yvette’s midwife when the time arrives,’ said the Countess. ‘That midwife is well trained and fully experienced.’

‘But, of course,’ said the Monsignor. ‘I shall see that Mother Superior will find no objection.’

‘And,’ went on the Countess, ‘if the attendance of a doctor

'becomes absolutely necessary, she shall have my own doctor. He is perfectly dependable.'

'An excellent suggestion, my dear.'

'I trust that we shall be informed when the time arrives.'

'Tell me,' he said, falling in with her mood, 'how did she look when you last saw her?'

'She was in her room. They told me she was a little indisposed. The shock of her father's death must have affected her deeply. . . . She is very pretty, Assalon. I wish she were less so! Perhaps then I could learn to hate her less.'

'Pretty,' repeated the Monsignor. 'And virtuous, however hard life may have dealt with her. Ah, yes, you come across several such cases in her class!'

'That doctor at the Institute appears to me wholly incompetent.'

'Do not worry, Ermelinde, I shall see to these matters.' He paused. 'About John,' he began. 'You will write to him, of course.'

'I shall write.'

'A sensible conclusion. You must see to it that you welcome him unreservedly.'

'I shall try.'

'Good! Good!'

He rose and moved to the cage.

'See, Ermelinde,' he said delightedly, 'our little friend is himself again.'

And, indeed, the budgerigar was perched on the ledge of the seed-trough picking one seed after another, although slowly and with apparent effort.

A few of the seeds slipped from its mouth and they fell through the bars and settled upon the floor of the veranda.

The sparrows would come fluttering in for them, once the coast was clear.

CHAPTER XL

I

The discovery that John had left and gone abroad affected her in a strange way. The shock was great, for she had least expected it. But it was not so much the fact of his going which affected her as the sudden, startling break the knowledge produced in her whole way of thinking.

All the time she had been at the Institute, she had felt herself sustained by the knowledge, sometimes conscious and sometimes just a feeling, that John was near. She had remembered him, turned to the memory of him when the days lay heavily upon her. When she dreamed of him, she awoke refreshed. In her mind, John had been no farther away than the other side of the high garden wall that separated her from the world outside.

Now, she stretched the numbed powers of her imagination to their limit, searching for him. Often she did not find him. She had never been abroad. She knew little of life outside the Island. It was a cold, heart-breaking search over unknown ground. At night, she closed her eyes tightly and tried desperately to bring him near her, to feel his hands again. A cold, bitter struggle ending in an exhaustion that left her limp and powerless to move.

And then, while she lay defenceless, the doubts came, one stab of doubt after another, so that her body shook all over in the night, and a cold sweat broke over her. The doubts came like blinding bursts of light in the darkness, hurting her. Nausea gripped her. When this happened, she hated the being in her body and wished to God she was free of it. . . .

Sister Griselda noticed her paleness and the uneasy movements of her body, and she went out of her way to be pleasant to her. She gave her light tasks to do and, though she would have dearly loved to learn the truth from Lucia, yet, for a time, she kept her chatter to herself and her pots and pans.

For a time! Once, however, she said to Lucia: 'Try to bear your trials patiently, my child. It is the Almighty's way of kindling in you the love which you are to have for the little one.'

Lucia said nothing in return, nor did she raise her eyes from the potatoes she was peeling.

'It is also the little one's way of loving ye u,' continued the nun hoarsely. 'You must not mind his little ways, Lucia. It is only for a short time, after which will come unbounded joy.'

Lucia looked at the old nun, with her wizened, anxious face. What does she know about pain, she thought, or loving? She tried to picture her as she might have been once—young and perhaps pretty. But all she saw was the long, pasty face, the shrivelled skin, the pathetic irregularity of her body.

She put away the large colander and rose. 'It is true what you say,' she said. 'But it is not true that it is only the child who brings a woman fulfilment.'

Sister Griselda raised her hands in shocked surprise. 'But what are you saying, dear child?' she exclaimed. 'The little one is your whole life.'

Lucia smiled. She was tempted to disillusion the old woman—this woman who had never loved or suffered in love; whose body had never known physical passion; a woman as good as dead in all but the spirit! But she did not have the heart. She laid a hand on the old nun's shoulder. 'Sometimes I do not know what I am saying,' she said gently. 'Forgive me. It is as you say; you are so much wiser than I.'

The nun's face lit up with delight. She led Lucia back to her high stool. 'I want you to sit here,' she said, 'and I shall make you a cup of good, black coffee. It will help you, and the little one, too.'

As the nun shambled away to make the coffee, Lucia's eyes filled with tears.

She thought: how would she feel if she were in my shoes? Kind Sister Griselda, she is the best one of the lot—a true friend, so generous, so full of understanding, so erratic and yet so gentle! All that is left to her is to scour the pots and

pray and meditate. And if she tries to take part in her mind and heart in the birth of a baby and steal for herself some of the joys and the pains which that entails, what is it but the irresistible force in her, a force behind that black, heavy garment which is a symbol of her self-imposed loss?

She must never fail to be understanding towards Sister Griselda.

The thought gave her courage and she felt she should be glad that even though she could no longer find John, she had at least his child constantly with her. It was foolish of her not to have seen it in this light before. And it was all due to good Sister Griselda: by pointing to her, however unwittingly, the vague emptiness of an imposed sterility, the nun had made her aware of her own good fortune.

From now on, she would try to be fairer to the little one—and to John.

When Sister Griselda returned with a large cup of steaming coffee, Lucia drank the warm, cloying syrup thankfully.

The days began to feel better, and she slept better. She no longer searched for John; but, strangely, with no effort at all, she seemed to find him again! He became real to her again; every time she wanted him, he was there. . . . She had never thought it could be so easy! She had only to whisper his name and there he was, exactly as she remembered him.

At the same time, she felt, sincerely, calmly, that it would never again be so terrible if he were not there when she looked for him. Those excruciating days and nights were behind her; they would never come again! She was certain of that. Even if she searched and did not find him. . . .

Now she could give more and better attention to her work. She found she could tolerate better both the nuns and her fellow-inmates. Her mind developed a degree of concentration that pleased her greatly. Her embroidery improved; her work in the kitchen surprised the nun and delighted her. She made new friends. A kind of wisdom descended upon her, and she spoke with words at once gentle and far-seeing.

And all the time, she was conscious of her new-found calm.

It was as if, after running for a long time, she had at last lain down on soft grass. The walls of the garden were no longer a division but a containment.

Then, after a time, as if to complement her new peace of mind, the little one lay still and she was hardly aware of him. It was as if he did not exist.

2

It was the sixth month and, one day she was called to be examined by a doctor she had never seen before. With him was an elderly-looking, heavily-built woman.

As the woman helped her to undress, Lucia felt her eyes irresistibly drawn to her arms. She had never seen anything like those arms. They were bronzed and their muscles bulged, below the upturned sleeves, like a man's. For a moment, she felt afraid of them. Strong, powerful arms!

She lay down on the cold couch and the doctor came forward. He looked young and his hair was only just beginning to grey at the temples. His eyes were dark and impelling; his hands light and gentle and warm. He looked efficient.

He told her he was satisfied with her general condition and that he would examine her again in a month's time. He smiled at her kindly before leaving. The woman hardly glanced at Lucia as she followed the doctor to the door.

Lucia watched her until she disappeared from view. Apprehension filled her. The memory of those arms like a man's appalled her. She found herself praying silently to God to save her from those arms. Sister Imelda appearing to convey her back to the women's quarters was a relief. . . .

Lucia could not forget the sight of those arms and in the storm, three nights later, they grew in her mind's eye out of all proportion. The thunderclaps were the hammering of those arms; the lightning their tremendous power.

She tossed and turned and knew that unless the rain fell, it would flash and thunder the whole night long. The night was a vast, heavy blackness. And it was evil.

After a particularly loud clap, someone shrieked in one of the other rooms. She wondered whether it was a nun or one of the other women who had shrieked. But no matter, the shriek would turn to weeping and, with weeping, half the fear would be gone.

She turned to face the window and watched with fascination the rhythmic flash of lightning on the grey wall of the oubliette beyond the iron bars. She noticed details she had not noticed before—crevices in the mortar, like mouths; patches of scaling lime; weather-sculpted faces; a nail or two. Flash after flash . . . She counted: One, two, three, four—and then the mighty clatter. . . . The muscular arms banging on the roof, shattering the shadows, rocking the walls and the bed; raising the pitch of Carmen's sobs in her bed a yard away.

She could just discern the form of the girl's body and head under the bed-clothes writhing at the sound of the thunder. The sight disturbed her and she turned over to the other side; saw the whiteness and the stillness of Maria's face above the neatly turned bed-clothes. She gasped. Maria did not sob or writhe like Carmen; for all one could tell she might be fast asleep. Perhaps she was the only woman asleep in that house. She envied her. She wished she could lie still like Maria, but not to sleep, just to wait for the end of the clatter. After that, there would be time for sleeping and safety. . . .

She felt the hand in her hair, gripping it wildly. She almost cried out with the pain. Carmen's face hung over her, very close. The girl was weeping and shaking violently.

'I'm afraid, Lucia,' the girl said. 'O God, I'm afraid. Let me get into bed with you. I'm afraid.'

She threw back the covers and made room for the girl, easing the violent pressure of the girl's hand on her hair. Carmen's body was as cold as ice, and Lucia shivered. Quickly she drew up the bed-clothes again until they were both covered.

Now the storm was reaching its height. Carmen sobbed and muttered incoherently, pressing her body against her, her fingers digging painfully into the flesh of her arm.

She felt the girl's body, young and light, and she was filled with pity—despite the tearing pain of her arm.

'It will end soon,' she murmured to the girl. 'It will end soon.'

The noise was now almost continuous and the lightning flashed incessantly. A door slammed down the corridor.

The girl's sobbing had subsided a little, but her shivering continued, and her frightened sighs. Lucia felt that she could hardly breathe. She felt herself engulfed. . . .

And the arms were pounding—big, muscular arms, brutally powerful: the savage blows were racking her body with pain. The girl was torn from her side and the bedclothes ripped from her and she felt the pain again—it was all over her body now, agonizing pain.

Carmen's shrieks rose and Lucia looked up and saw Maria's mad, twisted face above her, felt her breath on her face, and her mad, flailing hands striking her.

She heard Carmen's screams from the floor where she had been thrown and then, an instant later, the pain from Maria's blows ceased to matter any more. . . .

CHAPTER XLI

Her first impression was that of unimaginable whiteness. But this only lasted for a moment. The whiteness immediately turned to grey which curled and twisted before her eyes in all manner of impossible shapes.

She looked on, very calm and hardly caring; it did not matter to her whether the grey shapes remained or went away. Yet there was something comforting about them—their crazy motions were smooth, forming eddies which slid oilily towards her and around her. She almost felt their soft, rhythmic expansion and contraction. It was soothing. It made her feel relaxed; made her want to sleep. She knew this grey presence would lull her to sleep in the end. How pleasant, sinking, sliding, sinking slowly to depths and depths of sleep. Sleep, fall gently, gently down . . .

She felt cheated when the grey shapes began to fade and lose their smooth, curvaceous outline, and the whiteness returned. Not the blaring, splashed whiteness of a moment ago, but a hard whiteness with a solidity and a fixedness that startled her so much that she knew she could not hope to sleep now!

Her vision cleared and she saw clearly, materially, the white walls and the white ceiling, the strange-looking instruments on tables and shelves. And suddenly, close to her, the long, pixie face of Sister Griselda. She was surprised to see how perfectly clear were the details on that face . . .

'God be praised!' Sister Griselda said over and over again. 'God be praised!'

She looked at the nun.

'What am I doing here?' she asked hoarsely.

Sister Griselda was unhearing. With eyes closed and hands clasped together, she kept saying: 'God be praised!'

Lucia looked at her and at the white blobs that now appeared through the shut eyelids. She felt a little alarmed. But then she seemed to lose sight of the nun, and there was nothing

but the white walls and ceiling and the sparkling glass tubes, strangely contorted, and the new, dull ache in the pit of her stomach.

Then something approached and took shape, breaking the white unity. Mother Superior herself. Tall, so tall, and unsmiling, looking down at her with eyes over which the eyelids were finely drawn. She forgot the ache then; she forgot everything. The cold, set face of the nun filled her with doubt. O Mother of God, she thought, what have I done now?

Thankfully, there was Sister Griselda's long, yellow face peeping round the side of Mother Superior, reassuring her a little, but not sufficiently. She tried to rise. An eddying pool of red and ochre sprang suddenly before her and the figures and the room swam before her eyes. Only when she lay flat again did things resettlement.

'You must not move, Lucia.' She was glad for Mother Superior's voice; it was something she knew well, linking her with normality.

'What has happened, Mother?' she asked.

'God has been merciful to you, child,' the nun replied. 'More merciful than we had hoped, may He forgive us! You must rest now.'

Then the nun was gone, and Sister Griselda put her face close to hers. 'We have all prayed so hard for you, Lucia,' she said, 'and God, in His infinite mercy, has given ear to our beseechings.'

And she burst out crying, this old, dry sentimental nun. She wept unashamedly. Her face had never looked so devastated and so ugly. . . .

The room in which Lucia lay was a large one. It was airy and spotlessly clean. Here were treated all the Institute's maternity cases. It had served its purpose well over and over again; dramas of failure that had been enacted in it had been few and far between.

And yet, Lucia very nearly had been one of these.

She had lost the child. The savage arms of the storm had taken their toll. She remembered everything clearly now. It

had been clear to her even then, in that short, flashed interval between Carmen's shrieks and the recognition of the mad face bent over her in a rage of murderous jealousy. It had been very clear then, but it had needed this period of unconsciousness to make her realize that what had happened was, in part, the crystallization of a desire, a deep, secret desire within her that, somehow or other, it should end so.

She herself had never been really and fully conscious of this awesome desire. It had lain hidden in her, real but vague, and yet she had hardly known about it! But now she knew. She had wanted to lose her child.

When she had ceased to desire the world beyond the garden walls, and felt a completeness within her, she had also ceased to desire her child. Now it was done.

Fittingly, she recalled the very young man with the scrubbed, eager face and self-conscious politeness leaning over the Agency's counter. How ridiculously young he had looked! Since then, she remembered, the child she was bearing had become suddenly heavy, a dragging weight. And her secret desire, unknown to herself until now, had begun.

But now it was done.

CHAPTER XLII

Maria had been removed to another room, so that now she and Carmen had the bedroom all to themselves. Carmen had become strangely quiet and, however hard Lucia tried to recreate their old companionship, she remained moody, unsmiling and distant. It was a difficult situation.

From the other women, Lucia learnt that Maria had to undergo a rigorous inquiry at the hands of Mother Superior and the senior nuns. They whispered how she had been subjected to some of the most humiliating and self-denigrating penances in the statute of the Institute. There had even been talk of the law and the Courts but, presumably due to Maria's previous good conduct and the fact that Lucia had recuperated without any real injury to her health, the matter of the law had been dropped.

As a further form of punishment, Maria seemed to have been even deprived of the satisfaction of making an apology to Lucia, for the nuns saw to it that the two never met. This is a House of Rules, Mother Superior had said. And rules must be upheld! Maria had her meals, prayed and worked in strict isolation from the others.

These arrangements worried Lucia, for she could well imagine what Maria was going through. . . . Once she approached Mother Superior with a request to see Maria, for a minute at least, and explain to the wretched woman that, where she was concerned, all was forgotten and forgiven. But Mother Superior remained adamant.

'Neither you nor, for that matter, anyone else,' she told her, 'can be allowed to hamper the Lord's cleansing of the woman. It is entirely in His own merciful Hands.'

Lucia, reverting to her old work in the kitchen and the garden, felt that she needed cleansing, too. She admitted this to herself over and over again in the course of the day, as well as in the night, until sleep came like a blessing to her tortured mind.

Of John she now thought with a sense of disinterested conjecture. Where was he now? Did he still look the same? That was all. After which she went on trying to find a way to purge herself of that evilness which had made her not want the child and, when he was lost, not miss him.

She wished she could confide in somebody. Somebody who could soberly weigh up her chances of a life absent of unhappiness and remorse. She thought of telling Sister Griselda; but that was out of the question. The old nun had been heart-broken over the loss of the child as if it had been her own and to tell her that it had not been wanted by its mother would only be cruel. And she dreaded to burden her conscience still further.

There remained Carmen. There were times when they were alone in the room, when Lucia could sense the other's wariness, like a wounded beast that bristles at the merest hint of a touch on his open sore.

It was no use telling her, but once, while they were preparing for bed, Carmen turned round suddenly and said, as if she had been wanting to ask the question for a long time: 'Would you wish to have another child?'

The question came so unexpectedly that she just stared at the girl, too surprised to speak.

'Well?'

'A child?'

'That's right. Just because you lost that one it doesn't mean you can't have another. Well?'

She looked away from the girl in some confusion and bent down to fold some freshly laundered clothes that lay on the bed.

'You know quite well I am not even married.'

'You weren't that first time. You can be the second time, when you leave this place. When do you leave anyway?'

Slowly, she folded the clothes over her arms before she answered. The words seemed to come to her mechanically, so that she was surprised at herself for saying them.

'I am not leaving here,' she said.

Carmen looked at her quickly. Her full lips parted and her face paled.

'What did you say?'

'I said . . . I am never leaving here.' For a moment she had a feeling that it was not she who was saying the words, but someone else, a stranger to her.

She sank to her knees on the floor and covered her face with her hands.

'O God!' she said. 'O God!'

The words remained with her after that. They became part of her thinking. She struggled hard against their implication; she tried to give them a different construction but she failed every time. She counted the weeks and said to herself: 'In two months' time, I shall be twenty-one. On my birthday, I shall leave this place—for ever. I shall leave this house of bitter memories. I shall leave.'

She simulated eager anticipation. She talked about it with the other women, was delighted at the envious looks they gave her. 'In two months' time!'

But it was a sorry game and she always lost. The mood would pass; the self-dissimulation would crumble away; there remained one conviction, the true one.

She asked for an interview with Mother Superior and to the nun she spoke about the decision she had made. The nun showed no emotion; she told her to look well into herself again. Later, she could come to her again and tell her what conclusion she had arrived at.

The old doubts and uncertainties returned. The old dissimulations were revived. She prayed and was restless when her prayers failed to give her any concrete answer. Often dissimulation and reality became as one, so that she did not know which was which.

In Carmen, through whom she had discovered her intention, she found no help. After that one, single attempt at conversation, the girl closed up like a clam and went about wrapped up in her own thoughts, hardly looking at her and—Lucia knew—secretly despising her.

The answer came one night, long after the lights had been turned off and the house was shrouded in darkness and in sleep. A shrill, piercing scream roused echoes. It was followed by another and another. Although they seemed to come from a far end of the building, yet they sounded near enough to throw the women into a panic. Lights went up. Voices rose together. For a while there was utter chaos.

Next morning, the hushed whisper went round. Maria had gone stark, raving mad. She had broken a chair against a wall of her room and battered her head against the iron bedstead. She was bleeding. Two doctors were with her. Soon she would be taken to the hospital, and then to the lunatic asylum. That was what had happened to Maria, the white woman. Now she would go on screaming and trying to batter her head all her life. . . . The women moved on in awed silence.

'She's been mad all along, anyway,' said Carmen, viciously. 'It was only a question of time.'

Lucia felt her blood run cold.

While they were carrying the screaming woman downstairs, she ran to the far corner of the garden. She placed her hands flat on the wall and pressed her forehead against them, closing her eyes and gritting her teeth. She sobbed to herself wildly, even as the screams grew fainter and fainter.

Then all was still. The garden remained empty except for her and the shuddering sound of her sobs dying out. And she knew the answer . . .

One day, the thing that had happened to the white woman would happen to her. One day, she would scream like her and be carried away. One day, she would be all these things, and perhaps more—unless she remained within these walls and, unlike Maria, resigned herself to the cleansing that would last all the rest of her life.

She hurried in to tell Mother Superior of her decision, treading on an orange as she passed. It was a windfall and it lay pressed and squashed in the soft, humid soil. By tomorrow, its juice would be gone, dried up and licked greedily by thousands of ants. All that would remain was the dry skin.

CHAPTER XLIII

In the Xiberras household, there were considerable comings and goings. Fresh air wafted into the rooms through wide-opened windows. The faintly acrid smell of wax-polish and newly cleaned silver lingered in the air. ~~Now~~ and then, a maid would appear noiselessly, enter the dining-room, dart a glance at the well-laid-out table, nod approvingly and vanish again in the direction of the kitchen.

The Countess appeared at the top of the stairs. She walked down unhurriedly, perfectly poised, as another woman might walk before an audience. If she were feeling any excitement or trepidation there was no sign of it on her face. Except that her face looked paler than usual. Her silver hair, apparently only recently done, glistened purely.

She made for the dining-room and stood surveying the table with appraising eyes: there was nothing she could do. She went into the lounge, sank into a chair and waited. . . .

It had been most kind of Assalon to offer to go and meet John at Luqa airport. At first she had feared that Assalon might expect her to go with him. There were many things lately, some of them quite small, unimportant things, which made her unnecessarily anxious and apprehensive. It was with relief, therefore, that she had heard him explain that John might prefer the reunion with the entire family to be gradual; besides John might resent an exhibition of family rejoicing in such a public place as an airport.

Doubts filled her. John had taken a long time to answer her letter. And his reply, when it came had been short and formal. But he had accepted the arrangement. Much as this had reassured her, she could not rid herself of many doubts. She wished she knew how it was going to be. She might relax then, be a little less anxious and apprehensive!

She looked at the ormolu clock and saw that it was nearly twelve o'clock. They were late. According to John's last letter to his uncle, his aeroplane was expected to land at 11.20.

Over half an hour late! She had a sudden vision of disaster. Of the plane being overdue owing to some terrible mishap. She forced the thought out of her mind.

She would do well to think of other things. The Monsignor had suggested an unqualified welcome from her. She would do that. In fact, she would do more than that—if it were at all possible.

The girl! Ah, yes, the girl! Assalon would have to see to that—and he alone. It was weeks since she had discovered that she did not wish to have any more to do with that problem. She would not mention the girl. She would talk to John as if there had never been this separation. On that she was quite firmly resolved. So far as she was concerned the girl might never have existed. It was a piece of make-believe that she had been living persistently to turn into an absolute reality. To see John again and speak to him—that was, without any shadow of doubt, her one and only desire now. . . .

She had sunk so deeply into thought that she had not noticed the presence of her husband in the room! ,

He stood at the window with his back to her; his head was bent, his hands were clasped behind him. She noticed how shrunken he looked, and aged. Now, for the first time in many, many months, she studied him carefully in silence. She felt no pity. Perhaps later . . . but not now! Now she could feel nothing besides her desire for her son.

The Count withdrew from the window and looked at her. He smiled at her across the room.

'How still and peaceful you look, Ermelinde,' he said. 'Are you waiting for John? If that is the case, I shall wait with you. I felt so cold in my room a moment ago!'

Then, as if there had been no break in his contemplation of the garden, he turned to the window again. He has already forgotten me, she thought. I must see to him—some day; but not now, not yet . . . not today! The doctor will continue to see to him . . . until I am ready . . . He must wait. I, too, have had to wait. . . .

She heard first the footsteps in the hall, then the Mon-

signor's voice. Before she could rise, they were in the room.

She looked at John, and she felt weak, so that she had to lay a hand on the back of the chair for support. She felt a dazedness, too. Through a mist she saw him walk towards her, and then she felt his arms around her and his dry, warm breath on her face. She embraced him, at least in her mind. She did not know whether she really did, physically. She did not have the time to find out, for he was away again and talking to her husband.

The mist cleared from her eyes and she saw the Monsignor's beaming face. She wondered how he could smile like that when she was going through sheer agony. She had not wept for longer than she could remember. She wished she could now. . . .

Her son's luggage was a good excuse for her to leave the room. She called a maid and asked her to take his bags up to his room. Then she lingered outside until it was time for dinner.

The Monsignor enlivened the table with his chatter. He asked John innumerable questions about Paris; but she hardly listened. She looked across the table at her husband. He sat, eating slowly, watching the other two men with interest. Sometimes he forgot his food. Then an intelligent look would come to his face to disappear almost instantly, like a candle snuffed out, and he returned to his food and ate slowly, mechanically. . . .

After dinner, she left the men and went upstairs to her room. She locked the door. She stood for a minute, staring before her, breathing with effort, then she sank slowly on the bed and hid her face with her hands. She sat like this for a long time, unmoving, as if turned to stone.

But she was thinking: I am a stranger to my own son. It will never be the same again!

She remembered the self-conscious glances he gave her at the table, his eyes distant. As distant as the breach between them. . . .

She had brought this on herself. Before, when she could have

had her son, she had kept him away from her; now, when she wanted him, she could not have him! And this time it would be worse; the separation more complete, more cruel, when he knew what she knew!

She wished now the girl had died with her baby. That way, she would not be alive now and ready to disown him when he went to her. She shuddered with terror to think what that might lead to. Where would he turn?

And still she did not weep. It was a dry, grating anguish that held her in its grip. Anguish, most of all, at her folly. Why had she not let him take the girl from the very start?

O God, when he goes to this girl, let her be weak in the resolution she has made. Oh God, please do not be jealous. Give her back to him! . . .

Then she heard him calling her from the landing.

CHAPTER XLIV

I

The day before her twenty-first birthday, Lucia was summoned before Mother Superior. She went, curious in a slight, desultory way. Even the expectancy of new developments resulting from her newly-formed decision did not make her particularly anxious. Her mind was made up. There was nothing to be anxious about. That's how it was with her.

Mother Superior smiled kindly at her as she entered the room. The Reverend Mother often smiled at her nowadays, but the smiles had no effect on her other than to make her conscious of the equality that now existed between herself and the nun. Long ago, she would have welcomed these smiles gladly; now she was neither glad nor sad: she was simply dedicated to a purpose and that purpose had been made inexorably clear to her by the decision she had taken. She felt calm.

'Tomorrow,' Mother Superior said, 'you will have a visitor. I know that you have been expecting this visit, Lucia, and, when the time comes, you may even find it not entirely in consonance with your resolution which you disclosed to me some time ago. On this account, until tomorrow is with us, I want you to pray. Prayer resolves many things. Perhaps it will help you, too. We also shall pray . . .' She stopped. The smile had disappeared from her face. 'We shall inform you, when this visit becomes imminent. You may withdraw now.'

Lucia left the room without a word. It has been all unnecessary, she thought, this warning, this counsel. For, look, she was calm. As calm as she had ever been . . .

Strange, however, how difficult she found it that night to pray. She tried to pray, but her lips uttered nothing more than snatches of supplication, quite meaningless because her mind was not in them. Instead, she was remembering the day she had gone to the Agency and she could almost feel

again the impact of the words uttered by the young man with the scrubbed face and the self-conscious pose . . .

That was when everything had become clear to her. All that had followed had been a logical outcome of that day: like looking for John and not finding him: finding him and yet not caring very much if she did not find him again; the loss of the little one, and she doing nothing to prevent it, even after Maria's blows had ceased . . . prolonging unconsciousness, holding herself back, subconsciously hampering the action of muscle and nerve, willing birth not to happen until, subconsciously, she knew it was a birth-in-death. . . .

All this had been as logical as it would have been logical of her to have called the young man at the Agency a liar. She could have said: 'You are lying. John would never do such a thing. He must be here. You are an impertinent young man.'

That would have been very logical—but it had not happened. Another fraction of a second it would have. But she had run out blindly, sick at heart and desolate.

Cause and effect. It had been nothing else.

Right to the very last decision.

2

When they came for her, they found her sitting on the edge of the bed, very straight and composed. She rose and, unknown to them, struggled for a moment to still the fluttering of her heart and the strange disturbing image that rose before her eyes.

She walked down the corridor with Sister Imelda by her side. The door of the visitors' room was closed. Sister Imelda was on the point of opening it when she laid a restraining hand on the old nun's arm. As if she had expected this to happen, Sister Imelda immediately turned questioning eyes on her. There was no mistaking that look. Lucia gazed back at her; and so they remained for a few seconds. There was no mistaking the cynicism in those old, old eyes before her.

How much did Sister Imelda know of human nature?

Hastily she drew her hand away, and gestured to the nun to open the door. . . .

The only light in the room came from a small, grilled window in the shape of a half-moon above the closed street-door. Mercifully, she found herself with her back to it. He rose when she entered, and he was full in the light from the segment window.

For what seemed an age to both of them they stood still, looking at each other.

Then her heart began to race again, and she had difficulty in keeping her hands from trembling.

'Here I am, Lucia,' he said.

She wished he had changed. But he had not. He was the same, perhaps a little thinner—but that was all. She remembered the jacket he was wearing. He had taken it off that day, at the Blue Grotto, and laid it on the sand for her to lie on. She remembered its feel against her body. . . . Yes she remembered that jacket well! The tie . . . it was blue, with little white dots. She had never seen him wearing it before. It looked new; perhaps he had bought it in Paris. Or perhaps he had always had it, and never worn it when he was with her. But it did not matter.

What mattered now was the memory of Maria's hammering blows on her body and the moment when she had awakened to grey, curving shapes, an awful whiteness and the relief that it was all over at last—the spell had been broken.

It gave her courage to think of that, for it made her think of the cleansing she had to undergo. Courage came to her so easily, making her a little surprised. She had expected everything to be far more difficult. And now it was not. It was pleasant finding things so easy.

He moved a step towards her.

'I have come as I promised you, Lucia,' he said. 'You are free at last, free to come to me again.'

How was she going to tell him? It was not so easy after all. There were things which dragged on one . . .

'I have my car outside,' he went on. 'We'll go as soon as

you've removed that horrible dress and gathered your belongings. I'll wait here while you're getting ready.'

'I'm not coming with you, John,' she said at last.

She saw him falter, fumble for expression, his hand outstretched to her.

'I have decided to become a nun.'

His hand dropped slowly to his side. He looked at her speechlessly, like someone completely out of his depth.

She felt sorry for him then. She dared not feel any other emotion. But she felt sorry for him. He looked so helpless. Should she tell him about the child she had not wanted? Better if she did not! What was the point now? No, he must never learn about the child. At least from her! Others might tell him about it, but she doubted it. The soil in the little cemetery not too far away would hold its secret. Even she might forget it in time . . . in time!

She looked at him standing irresolutely in the middle of this cold, bare room, lighted by a fragment of a window.

And, suddenly, she wanted to laugh. For she saw the effort he was desperately making to rekindle emotion, he no longer felt. She saw it all clearly. And it made her want to laugh.

'It is as I have said,' she said. She held out a hand.

He clutched it in both hands. His grip was strong and it hurt her a little.

'Lucia,' he said intensely, 'surely you have not forgotten? It is impossible that this should happen! Can't you see, Lucia?'

She could see. And she was glad.

'Goodbye, John,' she said quietly.

He still held her hand but with an easier grip.

'Are you certain, positively certain?'

'I am.'

She withdrew her hand gently and made a step towards the corridor door.

'Goodbye, John,' she said again.

He had moved quite close to her.

'May I kiss you?' he asked huskily.

'No,' she said, turning to him. 'Instead. Let me kiss you.'

She kissed him lightly on his cheek. His skin burned on her lips; everything else was unreal. She drew away.

'I must go,' she said.

'It is finished?' he said in a low voice.

'Finished.'

She opened the door that led into the House. Sister Imelda was not there. Presumably she had not waited. Perhaps, on closing the door, she had hastened away chuckling under her breath, a dry, cynical chuckle, feeling in her heart that Lucia was no longer her charge. Lucia had seen it in the nun's eyes a moment ago.

Sister Imelda was in for a surprise.

3

At the back of the Institute of the Good Samaritan was a long, straight road lined with trees. Except for the boundary wall of the Institute itself, there was no building of any kind.

John stopped the car under a tree and lit a cigarette.

What had his father said? 'Pollution, and one day you would come to hate her.'

Thank God, his father had been wrong: he did not hate her. Perhaps he would have if things had not taken this turn. He did not know. There were many things he did not know.

Where had it all begun? Paris? Or even before that. He pressed his fingers to his temple. It was so difficult to think, and so soon . . .

When he left his mother's home that morning, his uncle had been there. His uncle had said: 'Are you certain that what you are doing is right?'

'I feel it as my sacrosanct duty,' he had replied almost irritably.

He remembered now his uncle's reaction. 'Ah, duty!' the Monsignor had said in a queerly sad fashion, shaking his head slowly.

He had been right, of course. His uncle had noticed it; he was a wise man. Duty on cold feet, feeding it on the ashes of a desire!

Throughout the month he had stayed at his mother's house, after his return from Paris, he had tried consistently to give the impression that he was there only under protest—that the sooner he could get away again the better. He had made it plain that he was only waiting for Lucia; after that, he would accept them only if they accepted her.

He threw away the cigarette, and rested his arms on the wheel.

He had never imagined he would escape so easily from this duty in which he had so strongly believed, even though it lacked fire. Even when she had suddenly pointed to the end, he had still wanted desperately to do what he had come for. He had felt it was essential. One could not go through life haunted by the ghost of a duty!

Pollution! He realized at once that pollution worked both ways—not just affecting the Noble House of the Xiberras de Balyards!

He could only hope that she did not hate him. . . .

He heard the bell of the Institute Chapel. It tolled the mid-day Angelus in clear, unhurried notes. He started the engine and drove away slowly, the bell's chimes following him.

They led unhurriedly, regularly, to a note that died away even before he was completely out of earshot.

EPILOGUE IN TWO UNRELATED PARTS

I

Prayer comes easily in moments of clarity. It comes undisturbed then; a recitation from which nothing is left out. The salient phrases are given the proper inflexion and the pauses come right where they should. Then, when there is nothing more to pray, the heart is mute and still, but the mind, in the silence of after-prayer, uncoils its feelers in its probe for the cause of the prayer. It does so calmly, inexorably. There is not even exaltation; no excitement. There is only the quiet satisfaction of finding that the prayer was not unwarranted, that it was necessary.

So did Lucia pray that night in the Institute Chapel. For a long time her prayers had been incomplete, detached pieces of imagery artificially contrived and useless. Now they were whole. Everything was clear now, the set-pieces joined together, the interval between the beginning and the end clear and comprehensible.

Her first encounter with John; the night she spent with him; the dread in the old priest's house; the figure of the Monsignor as he sat facing her, behind him the gorgeous animals and hunters—thinking of these now was like looking into a deep, silent pool that reflected no clouds.

She prayed without uneasiness; and she was glad. For she was still not prepared for remorse. She knew that one day it would come but she did not wish to hasten its coming. There was time enough for it; she did not wish it on herself yet. . . .

On entering the room, she found Carmen already in bed. She remembered how the girl had hurried out of the refectory the moment they had finished eating. She had heard her requesting permission from the nun on duty to be excused from night prayers in the Chapel as she was feeling unwell. . . .

Now she lay on the bed on her side, hunched under the bedclothes.

She looks just like a child, thought Lucia, small and pathetic. She felt a great surge of pity for the girl. An intense desire to go to her and comfort her almost overwhelmed her. She moved forward anxiously, solicitously. But then she stopped and she knew that she was trembling.

She turned away with an effort and a sick feeling in her breast. She was suddenly aware of her detachment from the sorrows of Carmen. It was a final break: she had no right to presume that she had any answer to the girl's tribulations.

It was as well that she had discovered this in time, before going as far as throwing her arms around the girl to feel her warmth and loneliness and draw to herself, like a spiritual sucking, that part of the sickness that beset Carmen's soul. To have embraced the girl would have broken her new sense of clarity which had now enabled her to pray once more and would have set back the cleansing of her own spirit. It would have done all these things, and perhaps more, had she not been careful.

With a feeling of relief she remembered that, as from the next day, she was leaving this room for ever, this room of many memories, for another where she would be on her own—alone with her prayers which she had found in the light of the half-moon window and in the nearness of the man she would never forget!

She turned off the light and crept silently into the dark corner near the unwieldy wardrobe, in order to undress. The new moon gleamed palely through the small, barred window, and she could see the grey wall outside like a dull, leaden cloud.

There was not a sound and, although she knew that Carmen was not yet asleep, yet the girl was so still that it seemed as if she were not there at all. At last she had taken off all her clothes and she stood naked in the dark. Her night-clothes were beside her, on a chair, but she did not put them on at once.

Her eyes, fixed on the small, yellow oblong of window, seemed to see many things.

Slowly, she passed her hands over her thighs and up her sides until they rested lightly on her breasts.

'What was once full will be empty,' the old beggar woman had said on a lost, sirocco-hagged day. 'But the emptiness will not grieve you; it will not give you despair, but courage.'

She closed her eyes, unwilling to lose the vision.

'You will feel contentment when everything is gone. . . . It will be like the priest's absolution and a peace.'

As she opened her eyes again, her hands fell slowly to her sides. Bending to pick up her night-clothes, she beheld for an instant the gleam of her body in the dark. A sudden gleam.

Then the heavy, coarse material slid over her and the gleam was extinguished suddenly and completely.

2

It was consummated. The thing was done. But in his heart something was entirely missing—the anticipated stirring of triumph. . . .

When John had returned and broken the news to him, then he did not know what to say. But he had turned away, and had suddenly felt tired and worn out. I feel like a spent candle, he thought. He had left the house as quickly as he could, tasting the ashes in his mouth, half-resenting his nephew's appearance of unconcern. He wished John had not looked so devoid of interest, so unconcerned—so unhurt!

He drew the sherry bottle to him.

Of course, there was now one thing left to be done; unburden himself to the Archbishop and request that he be deprived of Holy Mass.

He drank the sherry slowly, without the enjoyment the ritual usually produced in him. He recorked the bottle and put it in its place.

The Family was saved. The Family remained whole and unsullied. Surely there was some merit in that! Especially now, when war raged against every kind of time-honoured institution. Was not this business worth every sacrifice a man could make?

Emptiness! Where once he had eagerly looked forward to success. Not success, but emptiness! Even the sherry seemed to confirm it.

Emptiness after the sacrifice—the sacrifice of others, the sacrifice of himself, to the god of Family on an altar hallowed by centuries of uncrossed breeding! Was that not something?

He wondered mildly what the Archbishop would say. There might be allowances made because of his unsullied career, but he would resist that with all his power. He would insist on right and proper censure of himself and his actions in this business of Family.

Dimly he recalled stories of unfrocked priests. He thought of Australia and Canada—big, wide spaces where a priest could unfrock himself without rousing the curiosity of the public. There he would go about with his secret locked fast within him. No one need know—except God.

God would know. But surely, too, God knew, and He not, that never had he doubted that he was doing the right thing! Never for a moment, had scruple assailed him. The Family had been too big a consideration to allow that. One would die for such a Family—a hero's and a martyr's death. He had always believed that.

Until now, until that cursed moment when John came in and broke the news to him, looking unhurt and almost obscenely unconcerned. Then he had had his first misgivings. He had tasted the ashes in his mouth and the triumph so greatly anticipated had become all at once the nagging of a foul ghost. . . .

Things had certainly turned out the way he had wanted. But how much of it was by his own doing and how much by the intercession of Providence? For instance, he had not imagined for one moment that the woman would elect to lead the life of the cloister. Surely that was not his doing. Whose was it? . . . What was one to think of that? Where did his culpability begin and where did it end?

He wished he knew.

The vision of the unfrocked priest rose before him again, so

much clearer now. He shuddered. It was a thought, a possibility that was now too evil to contemplate.

He was still shuddering when there came a knock on the door and his housekeeper entered the room.

He stared at her with something like fear. He realized that from now on he would always be like that—fear of unexpected interruptions, sudden visions of faces, abrupt utterances of voices, words, gestures, places rapidly associated with things he wanted to forget. Only at night might he find peace. . . .

The woman held out the letter to him.

'It came with the post,' she said.

'Very well, thank you.' He took the letter from her and watched her as she made for the door again.

The sound the door made as it closed behind her was muffled but, to him, it sounded as if it had been slammed. The house seemed to shake and groan.

Anger rose in him.

'I must discharge that woman. She's becoming intolerable.'

He tore open the envelope and read the note inside . . .

' . . . lecture . . . extremely grateful to you . . . young people . . . problems of modern youth . . . so-called progress . . . your wisdom . . . experience . . . combat evil influences . . . the vineyard of the Lord . . . of immense and lasting value . . . '

He threw the letter away from him, but not before he had made a note in his diary of the date and place.

He rose. There would be no unburdening to the Archbishop. He could still do some good. There would be no unfrocked priest. And the Mass . . . The Mass might still be valid. To others, if not to himself . . .

He rang for the housekeeper.

'My cloak,' he told the woman. 'The air is chilly.'

He must go to Ermeline today. Dine with the family. Perhaps he would find them in a talkative mood. That would suit him.

Also, he must start giving more lectures, even if he had to invite himself. Work, that was the answer. Work hard. Many opportunities for work now. People and ideas that were a

menace to everyone. Threats to old-standing tradition—a sacred cause. Too much sudden progress, too liberal. Tendencies to secularize life in the country. Won't do! Socialism. Modernism. There was a direct threat. Must resist with all power. Must write, write and preach. Frontal attack, no quarter given. A war to the end. Scope for work there. Work. Work. WORK . . .

He walked out of the house and stood on the pavement. It was cold but bracing. He drew the collar of his cloak tighter round his neck and braced his shoulders.

He stepped out into the street and, when he reached the pile of debris, he carefully side-stepped it. On one side of the square, a bulldozer chugged and clanged, clearing a site. It filled the place with noise.

Workmen tugged rhythmically at long, stout ropes tied to the last crenellated ledge of the old, time-worn, condemned palace. There was a sprinkling of people watching. A little boy even. A little boy with a tattered kite in his hands, holding it by a short length of frayed, knotted string. There was awe in the eyes of that little boy as he watched.

The last tug was a great heaving one. Downwards. And the masonry came crashing down into the dust.

But the Monsignor had already turned the corner. And so he did not see these things.